

Denise Dunn

From: Susan Bonnell
Sent: Thursday, May 24, 2007 12:54 PM
To: George Tilley; Heather Predham
Cc: Stephen Dodge; Oscar Howell
Subject: Letter to the editor

The Department of Health has asked us to respond in writing to the Globe and Mail regarding Andre Picard's column from today. Here's my attempt at a response for George. Heather, can you please review and provide comments? Steve and Oscar are cc'd as well and comments are welcome. I'd like to send this late today or tomorrow if possible.

Dear Editor:

I read with dismay Andre Picard's "Patients suffer when labs get it wrong" and feel compelled to correct a number of key points in this column.

Mr. Picard jumps to numerous erroneous conclusions, including assigning an error rate for estrogen-receptor testing for an eight year period, but the most concerning point to me is his assertion that we told breast cancer patients and the public nothing.

Care providers in our organization called every single patient as soon as the review had been initiated (October 2005). We did numerous media interviews. We posted information on our website and advertisements in the papers. And as the test results were returned to us from Mt. Sinai we made sure that every individual had their personal information, whether there was a change in result or not.

After the tests were reviewed, 117 patients required a change in treatment. In December when we released this information to the public there was never any deliberate attempt to hide the results of the review, we just chose to focus on what we believed it to be the most critical piece of information. Why hide what we know will come out in court?

When legal action was initiated, it was not a surprise to me or to any of the individuals closely involved in this process. I can say categorically that it did not ever influence our decision-making process and it never does in any case. The individuals involved in the lawsuit have every right to take whatever action they deem necessary. We respect the judicial system and we have tried to act in keeping with that, allowing the legal matters to be tried fairly in a court of law and not in media.

I would agree with Mr. Picard when he says that the general public places great faith in laboratory testing. Although I am not a pathologist myself, one thing I have learned in last two years is that the science of this test – immunohistochemistry – is a burgeoning field with new advancements, new technology and new understanding every year. Our decision to purchase a new system in 2004 was not informed by suspicion of problems but rather by our desire to be on the leading edge and, moreover, to ensure that our testing was as consistent as possible for the benefit of our patients.

A lot has changed in both laboratory medicine and oncology in the last ten years, and we do not yet know what role these changing standards and practices may have had in our changing test results.

Eastern Health believes in and practices full patient disclosure practices. And we are committed to the cause of patient safety. In 2005 when we first became aware of a potential problem with ER-PR, we

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immediately began a review and evaluation process that ultimately led us to the decision to go back to 1997 to retest all patients.

The reason why we undertook such an extensive review was that we believed that if even one patient could benefit from a review, we had an obligation to ensure that every patient had that opportunity.

And the very fact that we have done this retrospective, despite the consequences – something that, to my knowledge no other organization in the country has done – speaks to our commitment to providing the best care possible to our patients.

George Tilley
President and CEO
Eastern Health



Susan Bonnell
Director, Strategic Communications
709-777-1426 (1338)