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CBC News

The chief executive officer of a health authority in St. John's apologized for not disclosing full details on faulty tests that may have affected the care of hundreds of breast cancer patients

Eastern Health CEO George Tilley apologized Friday for confusion caused by not disclosing results of faulty breast cancer tests.

"I regret the decision that we didn't simply refer to it earlier," Tilley said Friday during a media briefing.

"I apologize for the confusion that that caused."

Eastern Health disclosed last year that it had been having problems for eight years with hormone receptor tests, which determine which course of treatment is appropriate for a patient

Until now, however, Eastern Health — which operates hospitals and clinics at arm's length from the Newfoundland and Labrador government — had indicated that the tests' error rate was as low as 10 per cent.

However, an affidavit filed with a pending class-action lawsuit in Newfoundland Supreme Court indicated that the error rate was significantly higher.

Hundreds of hormone receptor tests done in St. John's have subsequently been redone at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto.

Of those, 104 patients required a change in treatment, with 96 eventually being prescribed Tamoxifen, a drug that is highly regarded for its ability to block the hormones that promote the growth of cancer cells, it adds.

A subsequent document, filed this week, showed that 36 women who have since died received inaccurate hormone receptor tests.

Eastern Health was aware of the error rate in the winter of 2006, but the public was never told about it until CBC News reported from the court record earlier this week.

That sparked public outrage and at times emotional debate in the house of assembly, with Premier Danny Williams on Thursday vowing a public response to the disclosures.

Tilley said Eastern Health never intended to mislead anyone while dealing with a continuing investigation into problems with how hormone receptor test results have been disclosed.

"We made a decision in this process to focus in on the results of those individuals who would benefit from a change in therapy," Tilley said.

Peter Dawe, executive director of the Newfoundland and Labrador branch of the Canadian Cancer Society, appreciated the apology.

"Full disclosure was important," Dawe said.

"Individuals could've been brought into the process a lot quicker — they should be part of the decision-making about their own treatment."

Williams said Friday that he is not ruling out a public inquiry into the controversy.

Williams, though, said that he has not lost confidence in the health-care system, and that the public should not "taint and smear" officials because of what happened.

He said any investigation to follow must balance the privacy of patients against the public's right to know.

"We need to make sure there's full disclosure to the people of the province, but more particularly to the patients and the families concerned," Williams told reporters.

A lawyer who ran a successful litigation practice, Williams said, "I can add to that, from a legal perspective, [that] once we know in fact that the legal liability has in fact been determined, then the people responsible need to step up and get those issues settled."