

# Wiseman confirms two-tier system

## Three health authorities still having hormone receptor testing done in Toronto

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More than three months after a so-called centre of excellence opened at the Health Sciences Centre in St. John's, three of the four health boards in the province are still having hormone receptor testing done at Mount Sinai hospital in Toronto, Health Minister Ross Wiseman confirmed last Thursday.

Results of the tests help determine the treatment options for breast cancer patients.

Wiseman says the new lab operated by Eastern Health is not ready to

handle testing from all regions of the province. He provided the information a day after Liberal Health critic Dwight Ball raised the question in the House of Assembly.

Ball says he was informed by officials with Eastern Health that samples from Central, Western and the Labrador/Grenfell health boards are still being processed outside the province.

Wiseman initially said he was not aware of the situation and would need time to find the information.

It's the latest development in the ongoing controversy related to breast cancer testing in the province. It was learned last week, through court affidavits, that hundreds of hormone receptor tests done between 1997 and 2005 were incorrect.

The government and Eastern Health have been heavily criticized for withholding from the public for many months the fact that 40-plus percent of test results reviewed—317 out of 763—were incorrect. Some 117 patients required a change in treatment.

Eastern Health CEO George Tilley apologized for withholding the information, but authorities have consistently stated that the well being of patients was the top priority.

Some 100-breast cancer patients are attempting to launch a class-action lawsuit against Eastern Health. The provincial government has also ordered a judicial inquiry into the matter.

Testing at the lab in St. John's was discontinued in July 2005, after questions began surfacing about the reliability of the results. Until February, all tests were being done in Toronto.

Wiseman says the St. John's lab will again start serving the entire province once the team that operates it "works through the mechanics of assuring the quality assurance program is working."

Meanwhile, debate continued Thursday about the way the province compensates pathologists. Some doctors have suggested a shortage of pathologists and a high turnover rate may have contributed to the high error rate for hormone receptor testing.

NDP Leader Lorraine Michael questioned whether

the latest increase in compensation for pathologists—approved last week by cabinet following two years of discussions with the province's medical association—is enough to address the shortage.

She says the maximum salary has increased to \$241,000, while the starting salary for a pathologist in Ontario is \$330,000.

She questions how such a difference in remuneration would help solve the doctor shortage in this province.

Wiseman cautions against only comparing salaries. He says it's more appropriate the look at the complete compensation package, which may include things such as education leave allowances, opportunities for professional development, and payments for medical malpractice insurance.

He says there are also advantages to living in this province, including quality of life and cost of living.

Wiseman says the province continuously strives to be competitive with other regions, particularly Atlantic Canada, adding the province's fiscal capacity is also an important consideration when setting compensation rates.

"It would be a great challenge for a province (like ours) to always be able to say we have the best compensation package of any jurisdiction in the country."

