

FRANKLY SPEAKING: Lack of Oversight

Health Ministry Infected With Chronic Disease : Lack of Oversight

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It's no wonder that people are cynical about politics, politicians and government. Those were my thoughts as I watched the Premier and the Minister of Health once again deflecting responsibility for the latest scandal to rock the government and the Ministry of Health.

I knew that both would be spending considerable time on their feet during this Question Period and that a good number of questions would focus on the morning's headline stories. Hundreds of cancer patients had been administered watered-down chemotherapy treatments in Ontario hospitals over the past year and 137 of those patients had died.

How could this happen? Who was responsible? Where was the Ministry of Health?

The hospitals where the diluted drugs were administered included the London Health Sciences Centre, Windsor Regional Hospital, Lakeridge Health in Oshawa and the Peterborough Regional Health Centre.

London hospital officials confirmed that 691 patients had been treated with the diluted drugs, of which 40 were children. It was also confirmed that 117 of those adult patients had died. Windsor Regional Hospital confirmed that 290 of its patients received the diluted drug and 20 of those patients have since died. The 37 patients at Lakeridge Health in Oshawa and the one patient at the Peterborough Regional Health Centre who were affected are still alive.

My mind went to those patients who had undergone what they were counting on to be life-saving treatments and were now being told that they had received diluted doses of chemotherapy. And what about the families of the deceased patients? Their questions would never be answered.

How would the Premier and the Minister of Health answer the questions that every resident of Ontario needs answered in the wake of this revelation?

Angered, but not surprised. As I listened to the responses from both the Premier and the Minister of Health I shook my head in disgust. They served up the same answers and defiant attitude that characterized the responses to the Ornge and eHealth scandals. As if their handlers simply did a 'cut and paste' into their briefing notes that morning.

The responses were all too familiar. The Premier and the Minister empathized with those affected. They knew nothing, but would get to the bottom of it. Apparently, not one of the thousands of health ministry bureaucrats, including the Deputy Minister of Health who is drawing down more than \$450,000 a year, had oversight responsibility for something as important as quality assurance of the chemotherapy drugs being used to treat cancer patients in our hospitals.

As the story unfolded, it was revealed that the Ministry of Health approved the outsourcing of hospital-pharmacy services in 2005, and either didn't think to put in place the appropriate oversight mechanism or as with Ornge Air Ambulance, failed to exercise its oversight responsibilities.

The same Minister of Health, Deb Mathews, presided over both files. It came as no surprise that her response is the same. I knew nothing, my ministry knew nothing, no need for an inquiry.

Here's what we know so far. Marchese Hospital Solutions, located in Mississauga, was authorized to provide the chemotherapy cocktails to hospitals. Hospital officials are saying that the saline bags they came in were overfilled, with the result that the drug was diluted by as much as 20 per cent. Marchese insists they delivered the drug as ordered and that the hospitals are at fault for not administering the drug properly. While that finger-pointing goes on, we know this...

No government body ever inspected the Marchese facility.

The Premier's response was to appoint Jake Thiessen, founding director of the University of Waterloo's School of Pharmacy, to lead "a review". While no one questions Mr. Thiessen's abilities, I believe patients and their families and the Ontario public deserve answers to questions that go beyond what went wrong with the delivery system of this chemotherapy drug cocktail. They deserve to know who was responsible and why the Ministry of Health has once again failed so miserably in its oversight responsibilities. That's why we need an open and transparent investigation, not a government controlled review.

The Ontario PC Caucus will be asking the Standing Committee on Social Policy to initiate an inquiry into all matters pertaining to this scandal, including the ministry's apparent lack of oversight and role in failing to monitor and regulate non-accredited pharmaceutical companies.

After months of hearings into the Ornge scandal, witness after witness confirmed the Auditor General's conclusion that the Ministry of Health had failed in its oversight responsibilities. The consequence for the Minister of Health was a promotion to Deputy Premier. What will her reward be this time?

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