

Dr. Brendan Lewis
Emergency Medicine Media Statement
April 12, 2010

Good morning.

Thank you for attending our second public information session to inform our patients and the public about the challenges facing medical service delivery in the province.

Today, we are examining the issues surrounding Emergency Medicine and the challenges experienced by Emergency Departments throughout the province.

Our panelists today are Dr. Tom Costello from Lab City, Dr. Shawn Tiller from Gander and Dr. Scott Wilson from St. John's.

Access to health care when you need it is vital and is a fundamental right for all Canadians. Almost everyone will require some type of immediate medical attention at some point in their lives and for many, their first and only point of entry is the Emergency Department. All too often the ER is the only option because patients have nowhere else to go – they do not have a family doctor.

Emergency Departments are intended to provide rapid diagnosis and treatment for medical emergencies, such as life-threatening injuries and critical illnesses. They operate 24-hours a day, 365 days a year and are places where patients turn to when they are in their most dire time of need and most vulnerable.

I'm sure everyone is familiar with the overcrowding and long wait times found often in our Emergency Departments. We have all seen patients being cared for in hallways and the increased stress this is placing on families and medical professionals. Doctors worry about such scenarios because they are indicative of a malfunction in the system and compromise patient safety and quality of care.

Physicians working in Emergency Departments often have to make rapid decisions in intense environments. In order to ensure that patient safety is not jeopardized, ERs must be properly staffed and have the proper resources to meet patients' immediate needs. We must also find more appropriate and adequate alternatives for patients who do not necessarily have life-threatening issues, but simply have nowhere else to go.

During my Presidents tour last fall, I met with colleagues throughout rural Newfoundland and Labrador. They are very worried about patients who are seeking emergency care at facilities that are understaffed. The lack of specialists in our acute care facilities mean that patients are travelling from hospital to hospital to get the care they need.

In St. John's, the level of physician coverage has not kept up with the growing volume of work. Physicians there are also struggling to provide badly needed assistance to their colleagues outside the city who are without backup specialist support.

Things like staff shortages, heavy workloads and excessive call obligations, combined with increasing patient volumes, are factors beyond physicians' control and they are undermining our ability to maintain excellence in clinical care.

Included in our proposals to government, the NLMA requested a review of our Category A and Category B system, including how their services are resourced and organized.

This joint review would take place over a two-year period and would include a review of all aspects of the service ranging from the basic categorization of these institutions to the total hours of ER coverage required at each site. To date, we have not received an adequate response from government.

I'll turn it over now to Dr. Costello to discuss the challenges of being a solo practitioner in a rural Emergency Department in Labrador, followed by Dr. Tiller, who will discuss physician shortages and how the lack of family doctors is affecting the Emergency Department in Gander.

Dr. Wilson, who is also Chief of Adult Emergency Medicine at Eastern Health, will then discuss the reasons behind Emergency Department overcrowding and the importance of having the right number of emergency medical staff.

After each panelist has made their statements we will open the floor to questions.