

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

**QUESTION 414-19(2):
STANTON TERRITORIAL STERILIZATION OF EQUIPMENT**

October 27, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My question is for the Minister of Health and Social Services. The problem with the sterilization equipment at Stanton Territorial Hospital is about to enter its fourth month, and it appears we are tinkering away with settings and hoping to find a solution. I have to ask the basic question: why can't we fix this problem? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister of Health and Social Services.

HON. JULIE GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for that question. This is such a difficult issue because people are in pain waiting for this sterilization equipment to go back up to full functioning. It's very difficult to say to them, "We don't know when it's going to be fixed." What I can tell you is what you already know from your statement, Member for Frame Lake. These are complex issues. There are a number of different factors. There is the water quality, water testing for mineralization. The instruments themselves, Stanton has had specialist repair people come up from the South to assist with trying to figure out what's wrong with the machines, and unfortunately, none of this has yet resulted in a full return to sterilization and a full surgical load. Thank you.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. She alluded to the fact that patients are left in ill-health and misery. We just don't have a way of scheduling surgeries yet. Can the Minister tell me how many surgeries are on hold and what other measures can be taken? For example, can we not ship sterilization equipment into the Northwest Territories or other options to get people to surgeries they need?

HON. JULIE GREEN: It's not as if there are no surgeries taking place, it's just that some surgeries which require larger instruments are not taking place. As a matter of fact, since July, 200 surgeries have been completed, and of the 124 surgeries that were cancelled at the end of July, about 23 of those have been completed. There is a need, of course, to address this big backlog. Some of the things we're looking at is whether it would be possible for people to go to the Inuvik Regional Hospital and have surgery performed there. We had been considering sending patients to Alberta, but unfortunately, that is no longer an option because surgeries for Albertans are also being cancelled for a variety of reasons, including a surge of COVID cases.

The department has looked at the possibility of having the surgical instruments reprocessed somewhere else. They actually are going to perform an experiment in the coming week by sending surgical equipment to the Foothills Hospital in Calgary to see whether the sterilization works in that facility so that they can identify whether the problem is with the instruments themselves or whether there still remains a problem with the sterilization machine.

MR. O'REILLY: A big part of the problem here is the uncertainty for patients that are waiting. Not only have their surgeries been cancelled but there doesn't seem to be a solution anywhere in the future. Will the Minister see that regular public updates are issued? The last one, I think, was October 5th, three weeks ago. It doesn't even seem like there is a regular schedule, so can the Minister commit to a regularly scheduled update of the NTHSSA website and some way of actually notifying individual patients about what's going on?

HON. JULIE GREEN: There will be a letter going to all of the patients awaiting surgery at Stanton this week so that they can have an update on what's happening there directly from Stanton. In the meantime, if they are having pain management issues, and I know that's very common with leg, hip surgeries, then they should continue to be in touch with their healthcare provider to have appropriate treatment for that and that also can be done virtually if people are housebound. We want to expand the capacity, obviously, and we need to tell people when this is going to be resolved. Unfortunately, there is no specific date. All I can say is that they are working on it very diligently and we can certainly commit to updating the website every two weeks to tell people what has been tried in the prior to weeks and what the results are.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Oral questions. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that commitment to update the website every couple of weeks. I think that way people will at least have somewhere where they can get information about what's happening. The Minister herself talked about how COVID is surging in Alberta and that might cause some difficulties in terms of sending patients there. The other concern that I've heard expressed is, of course, the impending drastic cuts that may be made by the Alberta provincial government to their healthcare system as publicly announced by their Premier. What can the Minister tell us about these impending cuts, and how that might affect our ability to get surgeries and perhaps other healthcare in Alberta? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. JULIE GREEN: [microphone turned off]... that question. We don't have any inside information. We have heard, of course, about the privatization being contemplated in Alberta. We've heard about the possibility of wildcat strikes. We've heard about the surge in COVID cases. I'm going to say those are factors which will mean that there are fewer surgeries available to Northerners rather than more. Those are really issues that are beyond our control. They have been helpful in helping us to validate the sterilization in their own machines, but as for sending people there, that seems like a more difficult proposition. To be perfectly honest, those people I know who are waiting for hip replacements and other major surgery are not very keen to go to Edmonton for surgery at this point. Thank you.