

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 633-19(2): STANTON TERRITORIAL HOSPITAL STERILIZATION OF INSTRUMENTS

March 3, 2021

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Health and Social Services. The problem with sterilization equipment at Stanton hospital began in July 2020 and took almost six months to resolve. I do want to acknowledge that the new Minister certainly updated the public and myself more regularly when she took over the portfolio and did contact residents who were waiting, but I still have a basic question. What was the cause of the problem with the sterilization equipment, and has it been permanently fixed? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. JULIE GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Stanton sterilization issue is actually two issues. The first is wet packs, and the other is mineral staining. I am going to talk about each one. Wet packs: once ideal humidity levels were achieved and sustained, the wet pack issue was resolved at Stanton, and that happened in the fall of 2020. As the Member said in his statement, the importance of this is that, if the instruments are not dry, they can attract bacteria, which would then lead to infection. This issue has been resolved.

Mineral staining is another issue, and it continues. The root cause is not yet fully determined, but sterilization and water experts who have looked at the situation believe that the staining is caused by mineralization in the water, specifically copper and iron. There have been very many investigations into this and how this water supply system can be adjusted so that the water no longer stains the fabric that the instruments are wrapped in when they are sterilized. There has been some improvement, and now the fabric has light-coloured stains, which are thought to be not an issue because the instruments themselves are not stained. What is really important to know is that we have a very rigorous quality-control process to do the sterilization of instruments that are used in surgery to confirm that they are, in fact, sterile and that people are not being infected by the instruments that are used in their operations. Thank you.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. Of course, during the problems over the last six months, patients were often left in pain, and really, many surgeries were delayed. I just want to get some reassurance from the Minister whether there is still a backlog of surgeries and whether that has been cleared up.

HON. JULIE GREEN: At the time the sterilizer had to be shut down, there were 124 pending surgeries. They have now all been completed except for those people who asked for later dates in the spring. One thing that Stanton has done to address elective surgeries on the wait list, okay. I have to just start the sentence again. There came a point where they were not taking any more people onto the wait list because they had no idea when they could get through it, so there are an unknown number, unknown to

me at this point, people who would have liked to have had surgery but did not get onto the wait list. What is happening now is that Stanton, instead of closing through March break, is open to catch up on any of those surgeries that did not make it even onto the wait list because the sterilization equipment was down. I hope that's clear.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. It sounds like the backlog is going to be taken care of maybe before the end of March, and I really do appreciate that. These problems with the sterilization equipment, though, appear to have started soon after the new building was opened. Of course, this was a very large public-private partnership P3 arrangement, so I want to know from the Minister if she can tell us what the total cost of the investigations and delays were and who is responsible for these costs?

HON. JULIE GREEN: Just to clarify the timing here, the first hospital day was May 26, 2019, and the sterilization equipment functioned without any issues until July 23, 2020. That was the point at which they discovered that there were wet packs that were wet and material that was stained. What we do know is that Stanton has spent approximately \$50,000 to date for equipment testing and consultant expertise. As a matter of fact, it could have been more but for the fact that the sterilizer manufacturer has been providing expensive support throughout this time, much of which has been provided at no cost. It's important for the Member to know that the materials, the equipment inside the building, is the responsibility of the NTHSSA and not of Dexterra, the P3 operator.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Final supplementary. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that financial information. Of course, finally, I think it's important to know whether the -- we have cleared up the backlog, but I just want to get some reassurance from the Minister that this is not going to happen again, so can the Minister tell me what the likelihood is that the problems will re-occur? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. JULIE GREEN: The staff at Stanton would like to put this issue behind them, but unfortunately, this is historically a recurring problem that is most often occurring in April and May and aligns with the spring melt and the difference in the water chemistry. It has turned out to be a very unpredictable problem. It will appear and disappear, making it very difficult to investigate the root causes as much as we would also like to do that. What we have done, though, in preparation for this year's spring melt, is taken measures to mitigate potential future occurrences with the purchase of new equipment for the sterilization service in the form of new trays that will require less use of towels and fabrics. That should assist with the wet-pack problem, which is the problem that really reduced the number of surgeries. Thank you.