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For Immediate Release

Range Lake MLA Urges Northerners to get involved in specialist crisis debate

Range Lake MLA, Sandy Lee, is calling on the people of the North to voice their views on the breakdown in contract negotiations between the NWT government and its specialist physicians.

The two sides failed to come to an agreement after three days of negotiations last week. Specialist physicians have been without a contract since March of 2002 and 12 of the 15 have resigned. They say they will leave their jobs on July 1 if a new contract is not reached.

Ms. Lee is urging the health minister, the Hon. Michael Miltenberger, and the territorial government to negotiate a settlement. To help get the people of the North involved she released her position on this issue today and urges all Northerners to be involved in resolving this issue.

"The cost of not reaching a settlement is much bigger than the Minister is stating," says Ms. Lee. "The contingency plan the minister has in place if the specialists leave will pose a danger to the public. Northerners need to be engaged in this debate."

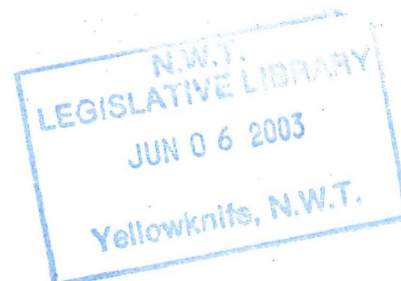
Ms. Lee is asking the public to call, e-mail or fax their MLA's, Minister Miltenberger, and NWT Premier, Stephen Kakfwi, and let them know how they feel about this issue.

"The people have a stake in this," says Ms. Lee. "I hope they stand up and take their rightful place in this debate."

A copy of Ms. Lee's position on the specialist physicians contract negotiations issue has been included with this press release.

For more information, please contact:

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Dear Constituents and friends:

So our health minister, the Hon. Michael Miltenberger, has gone public with information regarding the government's negotiations with the NWT's 15 specialist physicians. He says they want a 57 per cent raise and 66 days of paid leave. Hearing this news, maybe you're not feeling too sympathetic towards the doctors. How much is a doctor's service worth? I will let you debate that question at your leisure. But Minister Miltenberger's ill-considered campaign to boil down the issues of these contract negotiations to this level of debate is leading us dangerously astray from understanding and acting on what is really at stake.

The real question should be this: Do we want to have specialist services in the NWT? And if so, how much are we willing to pay for it from the public purse? Where should this spending priority rank in the government's almost \$1-billion annual budget? Based on what I'm hearing on the street, this is on top of everyone's list.

I will put it another way. What are the short and long term costs of not settling and having the specialist doctors at Stanton Territorial Hospital walk out the door as 12 of them will do by July 1 if no settlement is reached? And how does that compare to the short-term cost of settling it?

Commitment to health care?

What we should be aware of is that the NWT spends a lot less on physician services than other jurisdictions. We spend a little over 10 per cent of our overall health care spending on doctors whereas Alberta spends up to 35 per cent.

The fact is, given the geographical area and the population it serves, the NWT should have somewhere between 35 to 40 specialists. We only have 18 permanent and three interim funded specialist positions at Stanton Territorial Hospital. Out of those 21 positions, seven have been vacant for up to two years. That is a full one-third of the 21 positions. Why? Because our compensation package for these specialists have not kept pace with the rest of the country to stay competitive and attractive.

We are currently short of one obstetrics/gynaecologist (delivers babies), one orthopaedic surgeon (bone doctor), one psychiatrist (mental health doctor), one internal medicine specialist (organs and cancer diagnosis) and one general surgeon. Most of these specialists and others which only have one permanent position to start with, including our ophthalmologist (eye doctor), radiologist (x-ray and CT scan) and pediatrician (doctor for children), fly solo with no back up, except with locum doctor services when they are available.

This skeleton number of specialists and the unique practice of medicine in the North poses a whole set of challenges not found elsewhere. It warrants a different consideration in a compensation package. All of our specialists travel and take care of patients in every corner of the NWT and parts of Nunavut. Yet, all of their efforts to make the government understand their working conditions and ways to improve the recruitment and retention situations for the last number of years have failed.

Where are we now?

What we know is that 18 months of negotiations have not resulted in a settlement. The specialists have been without a contract since March of 2002. So they have taken the drastic action of mass resignation. I appreciate that many do not agree with this approach. But there has to be an end date to this protracted negotiation. The resignation letters by specialists were submitted back in March. But the government did not come to the table until the end of May, 2003.

Now Minister Miltenberger and the GNWT are waging a public relations war against the specialist doctors. And the public is going to pay the price of the fall out. It should have never come to this. And I am not prepared to sit idle while Minister Miltenberger and this government threatens to systematically dismantle our Stanton Territorial Hospital and destroy our health care delivery system in the process. The network of specialists services we have at Stanton have been built up over many years. It is fragile and it can be destroyed over night by one bad government decision. But it will take years to rebuild.

Before it is too late, the people of Yellowknife and the NWT need to voice their opinions about how the Minister and the government should end this brinkmanship and resolve this perilous situation.

What you need to know

What would it mean not to have the set of specialists we've got? Listed below is part of what I know.

In the short term:

- Contrary to the Minister's claim, the GP's (family doctors) cannot step in the place of specialists. In fact, their ability to do their job (like delivering babies) would be drastically reduced and hampered by doing this.
- Unless we have a locum specialists in place, all pregnant mothers will have to travel south at 36 weeks to deliver their babies unless a full contingent of locums is available. Family doctors need the back up of specialists (obstetrics/gynaecologist and pediatrician) to deliver babies safely.
- All elective surgery will be cancelled and only emergency surgeries could be performed and many of them will still have to be medivaced. Every case - from a broken finger to a heart attack - will potentially be flown south unless there are locums.

In the long term:

- The Minister assures us that the level of services at Stanton Hospital will be maintained by the use of locums in the short term and that in the long run, new specialists will be recruited to replace any specialists that resign on July 1st.

I have a question for the minister. If we have not been able to recruit specialists for seven vacant positions for months and in some cases, years, what makes him think we can do this now?

- In my opinion, there is a real danger the NWT will be blacklisted as a place where specialists don't want to work. The professional medical community is small in Canada and a labour negotiation breakdown here will not go unnoticed. As a result, it will become more difficult for us to recruit new specialists.
- Many other health care professionals (e.g. nurses) would not want to practice in a hospital without specialist services. The training program for newly graduating nurses would be affected. They need to be trained in a health facility with diverse services being provided.

This is not fear-mongering. It's a simple cost and benefits analysis. The cost of settling with the doctors has to be compared with the costs of not settling. And the costs of not having specialists extend far and wide. It includes extra costs of recruiting specialists, hiring locums essential to provide basic services, costs of medical travel, costs of fees for service we would have to pay to other jurisdictions for providing services to us and the cost of losing fees for service we get from Nunavut. The list goes on and on.

This does not include the costs each individual resident has to face when they have to fly south for services that they used to be able to get in the North. This cost is not just in dollars but in time, loss of pay, extra costs and loss of family support. And God forbid, what if there was a cost in human life due to lack of essential specialist services in the North?

I ask Minister Miltenberger; is not the cost of all this a hundred times more than the cost of reaching a negotiated contract with the specialists?

I believe that the most of the doctors want to stay in the North. They have indicated their willingness to continue to negotiate. I believe there is room for movement between what the government has offered and what the doctors have put forward. The government must go back and work on negotiating a settlement.

If this does not work, the government has already suggested arbitration. The doctors have rejected this for many reasons. They want this process to end by July 1. Any process involving arbitration could not finish in that time frame.

So, how much is a doctor's service worth? I don't know. What I will say is this - it is a fact of life that some people make more money than others. This should not be a debate about that. It should be about how much we value our health care services and what level of services we want to have in the North. How much are we willing to pay for it? And how much are we willing to fight to keep them and improve them?

What can you do? Ask your doctors or anyone else who might give you more information on this. Call, email or fax your MLA, the health minister and the Premier and let them know how you feel about this issue. You have a stake in this. Stand up and take your rightful place in this debate.

Thank you,

Sandy Lee
MLA, Range Lake