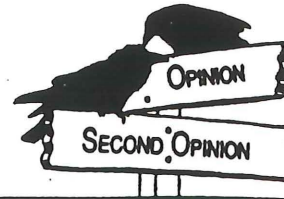


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# Opinion



## Time for a check-up

It's been an open secret that bad feelings have been bubbling under the surface at the Fort Smith Health Centre for years. If the call for a public inquiry is heeded, the whole sordid affair will come into the open for all to see.

About 100 people piled into McDougal Centre last Thursday. Most of them were supporters of Dr. Uma Viswalingam, whose medical privileges at the health centre were suspended indefinitely earlier in the week. They railed against the apparent injustice of barring the physician from practicing when so many depend on his doctoring.

Many suggested a cover-up. Words like "conspiracy" were bandied about. Most were just frustrated by what they see as an attempt to get rid of the long-time doctor on more or less falsified grounds because other medical staff and board members didn't get along with him.

A board of inquiry would preclude any input from "ordinary people," and its mandate is narrow - it's just looking at the controversial report about the medical services at the health centre, nothing else. Thebacha MLA Jeannie Marie-Jewell told the gathering she wanted a public inquiry into the whole Fort Smith Health Centre operation, but waited to see if she had the backing from her constituents.

They gave her a resounding "YES." Not one person disagreed. For all the dirt that has been going on in that institution, and with mouths shut tighter than Krazy Glue on the whole hornets' nest, a public inquiry is what it will take.

Some people have been preaching "unity" for the last few months, trying to submerge the ugly. Sometimes it's better to lance a boil that's been festering for too long, before the infection spreads. What has been going on there? Has it seeped beyond affecting hospital staff morale to the quality of medical services?

There have been persistent rumors of inappropriate prescribing of drugs by medical staff; and that some of them have not shown up to attend emergency patients while 'on call.' There has been talk of board members abusing travel warrants to take shopping trips to Edmonton.

No investigation of these damaging rumors has been allowed because the public was excluded from all discussions and decisions that were in any way controversial. It is not fair that good doctors and conscientious board members should have their reputations tainted by such talk. The only way to clear the air is through a public investigation.

There is no question something nasty has been going on. Emergency meetings have been held where the minister of health accompanied by high level bureaucrats has come to Fort Smith to scrutinize the health center board and deal with the problems. Yet no one in government has ever admitted that on record. It got to the point where staff members were bringing their lawyers to the board meetings.

The public has a right to know. Furthermore, this paranoid "behind closed doors" approach has caused the situation to fester and worsen. It should have been dealt with publicly months ago, long before it ever became this bad.

How proper is the process for "peer reviews," as the controversial review in question is being called? A public inquiry runs the risk of becoming a lynching, but not if it's handled well. It can also cleanse and start for real the "healing process" the health centre's been talking about for the last year or so. The time has come.

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