

orders abortion inquiry

Hospital used no anesthetics

BY MIRO CERNETIG
The Globe and Mail

Northwest Territories Leader Nellie Cournoyea yesterday ordered an inquiry into abortion procedures at the territories' biggest hospital after reports that abortions were being performed there without anesthetics, subjecting many women to excruciating pain.

After a rape victim told reporters about the suffering she endured during an abortion at Stanton Yellowknife Hospital last year, complaints flooded in to the NWT Status of Women Council from women who say they also were subjected to terrible and unnecessary pain during abortions at the hospital.

According to one letter, a doctor at the hospital — which used only analgesics and muscle relaxants for abortions — once told a woman she would get no pain-killing anesthetic because the man in charge of it didn't approve of abortion.

In addition to saying they suffered such intense pain during abortions that they begged for pain killers and had to be restrained on the operating table, former patients also said some of the hospital's doctors and workers displayed an insensitive and sometimes misogynistic bedside manner toward them.

Yesterday, the hospital's board of management issued a news release promising "to increase the pain control available to women who undergo therapeutic abortions."

"This plan is now in effect and the patients will be provided with choices for pain control during abortion," the release said. "Patients will be provided with the options of pain-control medication alone, supplemented with local anesthetic or replaced with general anesthetic."

Ms. Cournoyea, who accepted the resignation of Health Minister Tony Whitford a day earlier over his handling of the affair, also ordered the inquiry to investigate all complaints.

Mr. Whitford resigned after telling a reporter that getting an abortion at the hospital is a choice that women make, a comment interpreted by many as a suggestion that the procedure is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition.

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Women report ordeals

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Lynn Brooks, the executive director of the Status of Women Council, read to The Globe and Mail letters from some of the 83 women whose complaints will be passed on to the inquiry.

In those letters:

- A woman, described as well educated and white, wrote she was in the hospital for an abortion that was to be followed by a tubal ligation, and was supposed to have both procedures under a general anesthetic. "Everything had proceeded as I had been told it would, until just before the abortion was to take place. [Then] the doctor said: 'The anesthesiologist does not believe in abortions; we will administer the anesthetic following the abortion, for the tubal ligation.'"
- A 17-year-old complained that a doctor walked into the operating room before her abortion and asked: "When's your next birthday?" After her answer, he responded: "Oh, you'll be back here before then. Your kind always are."
- One young native woman wrote that when she asked whether she would "be put under" for the abortion, the doctor responded: "The only under you're going to get is the 40 below [temperature] outside."
- A Métis woman wrote that three years ago, when she was undergoing her first abortion at the hospital, a doctor walked in and said: "So, this is number five?"

Ms. Brooks said one woman who contacted her said that after her abortion the doctor said: "Well, this really hurt, didn't it? But let that be a lesson before you get yourself in this situation again."

Asked why thousands of women who have undergone abortions at Stanton would not have complained sooner, Ms. Brooks said that in the North, especially in the small hamlets, women are not accustomed to discussing intimate details of their lives. She added that many of those seeking abortions are young victims of rape and sexual abuse, and would likely have not known such pain was unnecessary.

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Yellowknife

The controversy first surfaced about two weeks ago when Ellen Hamilton, a rape victim from Iqaluit, told reporters that when she had an abortion at the hospital last year she went through pain so intense she had to be held down by several people. After the initial story was published, the hospital acknowledged that since it abandoned using general anesthetics for abortions in 1985, it relied on analgesics and muscle relaxants to ease pain instead of local anesthetics.

In Southern Canada, local anesthetics are used to freeze a woman's cervix before an abortion. At Dr. Henry Morgentaler's abortion clinic in Edmonton, executive director Susan Fox said an abortion has never been performed at the clinic without a local anesthetic.

"We just wouldn't do it without," she said, adding that she didn't understand why the Yellowknife hospital would not follow suit. "It's bizarre."

Although they decided to alter their procedures, officials from Stanton Yellowknife Hospital say the public was misled about abortion practices at their institution, which officials say met national standards.

Despite reports that one woman sent a letter of complaint to the hospital, Lynn Olenek, the hospital's executive director, said she has seen no formal complaints from patients other than in media reports. She had no comment on the letters sent to the Status of Women Council, saying she has not seen them.

The controversy is unlikely to end with the hospital's new abortion procedures. Ms. Brooks, for one, is appalled by the comments female patients endured from doctors, quips she said indicate both misogyny and sexism and must be investigated.

"What is the attitude that allowed this sort of treatment to go on for so long? That's what we've got to get to the bottom of."

Any disciplining of doctors at the hospital would be done by the Ministry of Health, which is responsible for licencing physicians in the territory.