

Cancer survivor's patience tested

April 13, 2012 - 4:20am BY KATHRYN WALSH

Lab work done less frequently, but oncologist insists blood test needed



John MacMullin stands outside the Dickson Centre of the Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre in Halifax last week. MacMullin's oncologist had to intervene to get a needed lab test done, showing he needed to resume treatment. (TIM KROCHAK / Staff)

When John MacMullin went to his most recent appointment with his oncologist, he was expecting bad news. But the bad news his doctor gave him took him completely by surprise.

"I said, 'I guess I'm going back on my treatment,' " said the 65-year-old cancer survivor from Sydney. "And he said, 'Oh no, the bad news is they cancelled your test.' "

A memo sent last September to all physicians, clinics and nurse practitioners within the Capital Health region stated that the department of pathology and laboratory medicine was partway through changing its rules on lab processing.

The memo stated the department wanted to avoid repeating tests within time frames that were too short to show a difference in results.

The department is located in the VG site of the Queen Elizabeth II Health Science Centre.

These "repeat rules" are a way to optimize patient and health-care system outcomes, said Capital Health spokesman John Gillis.

"Since April of 2011, there have been 18,083 lab tests cancelled under the repeat rules, at a cost savings of \$395,822," he said.

That's money that can be used elsewhere in the system, said Dr. Casely Tetteh Ago, Capital Health's chief of radiation oncology.

"The lab was right in reviewing and raising awareness of less-than-optimal utilization of a shrinking resource," he said. "Such initiatives must be congratulated in a time of financial ill-health in the province."

But MacMullin isn't about to do any congratulating. His cancer had been in remission for about a year, and he'd been having blood work done and checkups with his doctor every four months.

His oncologist in Halifax was concerned about some of MacMullin's symptoms, and sent him to have blood work done at the end of March. Unfortunately, under the new rules it was too short a time since the lab had last processed the same test for him.

He found that the lab had not tested his blood work when he met with his oncologist the next day. His doctor told him that even though the lab was cutting back, he still needed the test results because of MacMullin's new symptoms.

His oncologist made it quite clear on the second requisition that the lab was not to cancel this test, writing in big block letters on the requisition: "Under no circumstances, Nova Scotia Cancer Centre."

MacMullin had his blood work redone that afternoon, and his oncologist had the test results the next day. They showed that MacMullin would have to go back on his treatment.

After receiving a phone call from his doctor, MacMullin filled his prescriptions and began treatment the same day.

"I'm not as concerned . . . about my numbers being elevated and going back on treatment as I am about the fact that this could've slipped through," he said about his cancelled blood test.

He said he almost "slipped through the cracks."

"My tests were positive, and I need the treatment, and somebody should be held accountable. They shouldn't be allowed to do it."

Ago said the lab isn't allowed to cancel tests that come from the Nova Scotia Cancer Centre. It has a standing exception with the lab. "All we have to do is put a stamp (on a requisition) and they won't cancel."

The stamp identifies a requisition as coming from a cancer centre doctor. Writing a note on the requisition, as MacMullin's doctor did, would also work. All the doctors and nurses at the cancer centre have access to a stamp, "so there's no reason not to use it," said Ago.

He extended his apologies for what happened to MacMullin — the additional stress and anxiety of having the test a second time, not to mention "being poked" for another round of blood work.

He said it's the first time he's heard of a problem with the new repeat rules. "It's nice to hear about these cases, so we can look at our system and tighten things up.

"Now that we have a concrete example of this having happened, we can communicate this to our team and emphasize the importance of putting (the stamp) on requisitions."

MacMullin said he's just thankful his doctor sent him back the second time and made sure the tests got done. "Left unchecked? You don't want to know the consequences," he said.

"You can't do that with cancer. You can't."

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