

# Diagnosis delayed

*Labrador woman found out about cancer seven months after test*

By **BARB SWEET**  
THE TELEGRAM

Something went terribly awry in Eastern Health to cause Colleen Whitehorne to find out several months after her biopsy she has an eye cancer, says her husband Randy.

"There is something very lacking there,"

Randy Whitehorne said in a telephone interview from his Happy Valley-Goose Bay home.

"How many other people out there are caught up in the same situation? Not everyone will go out and dig into it like I did. That's the sad part about it."



**Yvonne Jones**

Whitehorne and his wife flew out to St. John's in June 2008 so the 60-year-old woman could receive a biopsy. When they heard nothing back, they assumed everything was OK. The first the couple heard of results was Jan. 19 and it was confirmed she had a low level eye melanoma.

But since then, a cat scan she received in Labrador revealed she has a small mass on the brain.

"We're worried about the mass on her brain," Whitehorne said.

When the couple got the call from her family doctor in January, further inquiries revealed the biopsy was reported from B.C. in July, Whitehorne said. It's not known why that result didn't reach the couple.

He said they now know a specialist at Eastern Health did review the results in October, after another doctor handling it resigned.

But still, there was no contact with the Whitehornes until months later.

"The thing that bothers me is we were out on the island in August. We could

have got it taken care of then," Whitehorne said.

"The positive thing about this is they say they can cure it, it's low grade, but then they discovered a small mass on her brain. They could have found that out before, too. There are lots of things we did in seven months we probably would not have done."

To find out his wife has cancer is upsetting, but to then discover the seven-month delay is unfathomable, he said.

"It seems to me that no one in the system is following up on it properly," Whitehorne said. "It looks like the diagnosis was mislaid."

An appointment has been made in St. John's for Feb. 20, and even then, Eastern Health tried to change that, which made Whitehorne even more upset so he insisted the date remain.

The cost of flights for two to St. John's is \$1,500, though they will be reimbursed.

Whitehorne contacted Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones about the whole ordeal in January.

Jones said she doesn't know what happened to Colleen Whitehorne's original diagnosis. Records indicate that the B.C. Cancer Agency told Eastern Health it reported the case in July, but Eastern Health has no record of having received it. When the inquiry was made in October, Eastern Health asked for the results to be faxed in.

Jones said it's galling the news still didn't reach the Whitehornes until January.

"The original report was lost for four months and it took another four months to tell her what is going on," Jones said.

She said nothing has been learned from the Cameron Inquiry and the delays that patients faced in getting results after faulty hormone receptor tests were redone.

Many patients in that debacle were left hanging for months, even years.

"Obviously there's still not a database," Jones said of the Whitehornes' ordeal.

"There has got to be better communications. There is supposed to be a better system, a more accountable system. That is not occurring. There hasn't been improvements in communication between Eastern Health and their patients."

Although Jones said it's not known if the brain mass is connected to Colleen Whitehorne's eye cancer, there has obviously been a "tremendous" delay in her treatment, which could make her recovery time longer and more challenging.

"These things should not be happening. It is unacceptable in the health-care system in this day and age," Jones said.

Jones also said the Department of Health should be keeping tabs on the health authorities to make sure they are following protocols.

She noted Eastern Health is still without a permanent CEO. Two years after George Tilley resigned, Louise Jones remains as the acting CEO.

The lack of stability is showing itself in personnel shortages, resignations, bed closures, delays in treatment and other breakdowns, the Liberal leader said, adding she wants an investigation into what happened with Colleen Whitehorne's biopsy.

It certainly isn't acceptable for a patient to go without the results of positive cancer testing for seven months.

What happened to the appropriate followup procedures that were promised during the Cameron Inquiry? Jones asked.

Eastern Health said Wednesday it has launched an internal investigation and will respond to Jones' concerns as soon as it can.