

Sparring continues over health cuts

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THE TELEGRAM

Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones says Health Minister Paul Oram is using the Cameron report as an excuse to cut X-ray and Laboratory services in Lewisporte.

On Wednesday in the House of Assembly, Oram noted two recommendations in the report — written after a public inquiry into the breast cancer testing scandal — called for a review of laboratory services.

But Jones responded the report says nothing about closures.

"What it indeed recommends is that there be investments and upgrades in labs ... around the province to bring them to a certain standard of accreditation," Jones said before claiming Oram was using the report as an excuse to justify the health-care cuts.

Oram replied with a rapid-fire list of the things he doesn't need excuses for, getting more and more animated as his government colleagues pounded on their desks and shouted.

"I don't need an excuse to look at improving services in Newfoundland and Labrador, I don't need an excuse, I say Mr. Speaker, to spend \$34 million in a community such as Lewisporte, I don't need an excuse to spend \$10 million or \$11 million in the community of Flower's Cove," he said.

Jones replied "well that was a whole lot about nothing."

"What the minister does need to do is justify his actions to the people of this province," she said.

Oram again repeated what he's said since the closures were announced.

That health improvements cost money and services need to be streamlined.

He also took a swipe at Jones, who continually had to shout her questions over the government members' taunts.

"I'm very, very pleased that this government has invested a whole lot of money into health care because if the leader of the opposition keeps going the way she's going, she may have a heart attack and she'll need to have some of those services," said Oram.

Jones also asked Oram about rumours of possible closures in St. Alban's and Botwood.

But Oram said the government doesn't listen to rumours.

Outside the House, Jones told reporters she got the information on closures in the two central Newfoundland towns from a source and simply asked Oram to dispel those rumours so people in those areas wouldn't be anxious.

She also criticized Oram's short tenure as health minister.

"It just goes to show how inadequate he is performing in his job in my opinion," said Jones.

When Oram spoke to reporters, he shrugged off Jones' comments.

— Photo by Keith Gosse/The Telegram



Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones speaks with reporters following question period Wednesday.

"I wouldn't expect the leader of the opposition to say any different," he said.

NDP Leader Lorraine Michael also asked questions about the rumoured closures.

She said there is already a shortage of doctors in rural parts of the province and called Oram's comments on Tuesday — that more could be hired if current doctors in Lewisporte quit — cavalier.

"Where does he (expect to find) more rural physicians, is he going to pluck them off the trees?" she asked.

But Oram said there are currently more practising doctors in the province than ever before and that three have recently applied to work in Lewisporte alone.

Oram also took questions on a possible swine flu pandemic and the lack of an infectious disease specialist in the province.

Oram said Eastern Health is working on recruiting a specialist, but said the province is ready for a swine flu outbreak regardless.

Speaking of closures, the House concluded its special sitting Wednesday after two days of debate and will reopen in November for the fall sitting.