

'Premier should have known' about cancer tests: opposition

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As the Cameron inquiry wrapped up its first full week of testimony in St. John's on Friday, the opposition was raising questions about when information about faulty breast cancer tests reached the office of the premier.

In her testimony, Eastern Health Chair Joan Dawe said then Health Minister John Ottenheimer knew in July 2005 about some of the problems in the St. John's pathology lab.

The public, however, did not become aware of the extent of the problem with faulty hormone receptor tests until May 2007, when the government announced a judicial inquiry.

NDP Leader Lorraine Michael said Friday she wonders if the minister told Premier Danny Williams at the time what he knew.

"I mean, if he didn't let the premier know, then he was definitely at fault. The premier should have known, number one. Number two, if he did know then it's absolutely really disturbing and disgusting that the government itself didn't take action," she said.

The inquiry led by Justice Margaret Cameron is examining how the pathology lab came to produce hundreds of botched hormone receptor test results between 1997 and 2005.

The tests are used to help determine the best course of treatment for breast cancer patients. Hundreds of patients were wrongly excluded from being considered for Tamoxifen, an antihormonal drug that has been shown to improve a patient's odds of survival.

In an e-mail written in July 2005, former Eastern Health chief executive officer George Tilley said Ottenheimer was encouraging him to go public.

He said nothing publicly at the time, however, and neither did Ottenheimer.

Ottenheimer is scheduled to testify at the inquiry on Monday.

The inquiry, which began hearing evidence last week, has already heard that 108 patients whose tests were incorrect have died. It is not clear to what extent different therapies would have meant different outcomes.

Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones wonders what might have been different had the information about the problems come out sooner.

"We would have had full disclosure here, we would have at least been open and accountable to the public, we would have been providing supports to them two years earlier," she said.

"And you never know, it may have changed the results and the outcome of the lives of some of these women.