

Williams 'flabbergasted' Osborne kept in the dark

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Premier Danny Williams was "absolutely flabbergasted" that his then-health minister was kept out of the loop on a 2006 briefing note updating the government on the magnitude of cancer-testing problems.

"That was beyond belief for me," Williams told the legislature Wednesday.

Former health minister Tom Osborne testified at the Cameron Inquiry that he did not find out about the briefing note until a May 2007 cabinet meeting. At that time, Osborne had already left the health portfolio.

Williams told reporters outside the House he had difficulty accepting that health department officials sent a detailed, four-page briefing note to him and his senior staff in 2006, but had not sent it to their own minister.

"It became an issue between myself and the minister," the premier



Premier Danny Williams speaks with reporters Wednesday after spending his third straight day in the House of Assembly fielding questions about the hormone receptor inquiry and who knew what when. — Photo by Gary Hebbard/The Telegram

said.

He said the officials confirmed they did not provide it to Osborne, but didn't say why.

No disciplinary action was taken as a result.

The premier said he was not aware of similar instances where ministers were circumvented in other departments.

"Not that I can recall," he said.

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NDP Leader Lorraine Michael speaks with reporters Wednesday following question period in the House of Assembly. — Photo by Gary Hebbard/The Telegram

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He said he has since stressed a directive ensuring that "there are no briefing notes that come out of departments without ensuring that they're signed off by a minister."

But the Opposition Liberals raised questions about the chain of command.

"I think it's absolutely ridiculous," Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones said. "Any time there's a minister (who's) head of a department, I don't think that officials should be bypassing them directly to the premier's office with information."

Jones suggested those officials were taking direction from either the clerk of the executive council — the province's top civil servant — or someone in the premier's office.

NDP Leader Lorraine Michael said she would like to see the directive from the premier's office making officials aware they should keep their ministers in the loop.

"I was flabbergasted, too, that something would go over the head of the minister," Michael said.

Williams has stressed this week that he has to rely on his cabinet ministers, telling the legislature on Monday: "Despite the opinion by some people that this might be a one-man show — which (it) has been termed — in fact, these ministers are managers of

their department and they are delegated with the authority to run their own departments. They, in fact, did this, and we were assured that things were being done right."

Asked by a reporter Wednesday how the situation could be considered under control if the health minister wasn't even aware of a briefing note on the issue from his own department, Williams reiterated he was unaware the document hadn't been shared with Osborne.

"How would I know that? I wouldn't know it either."

But Jones said this is not the first time the Health Department has bypassed its minister and gone straight to the premier's office. She cited the example of former health minister Elizabeth Marshall, Marshall

resigned from cabinet in 2004, saying Williams left her out of the loop when overturning decisions in her department.

And what does Jones think about the premier's "one-man show" comments, given Osborne's testimony?

"Well, there's one man who had access to these documents, and he was the head of the government, that being the premier," the Liberal leader said.

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Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones speaks with reporters Wednesday outside the House of Assembly. — Photo by Gary Hebbard/The Telegram