



## St. Joseph's General Hospital

*Question asked during Oral Question Period of the 26<sup>th</sup> Legislature of Alberta, 3<sup>rd</sup> Session from Dr. Kevin Taft, Hon. Member from Edmonton-Riverview, Leader of the Official Opposition*

March 22, 2007

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the past hour we have spoken to a woman whose father died from the MRSA superbug after contracting it at the hospital in Vegreville. This woman's father contracted the infection at the Vegreville Hospital in 2003. He was moved to a facility in Viking, then to the University of Alberta hospital, where his infection was treated very seriously. He was eventually transferred to a long-term care facility, where he died of MRSA. In the fall of 2003 this same woman has told us she contacted her MLA, who is now the Premier, to raise her concerns about safety and treatment issues at the Vegreville hospital. To the Premier: did he take any action based on the concerns that were brought to him about the hospital at Vegreville?

**Mr. Stelmach:** First of all, Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition is suggesting that I had some contact with an individual. I don't know who he's referring to. Usually in this House documents are tabled with respect to information when they're pointing special attention to either the Premier or any member of this House. So, first of all, there's protocol. Secondly, this is a serious matter, and I find it very upsetting that it has to come up here in the House. With respect to an individual patient we are very concerned about the health not only of the patients in St. Joe's but every facility in the province of Alberta.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a very serious issue. Again, to the Premier: can the Premier tell this Assembly and all Albertans if any other persons have died as a result of the breakdown of infection control at the Vegreville hospital?

**Mr. Stelmach:** Mr. Speaker, first of all, this Leader of the Opposition is making an assumption, nonprofessional. I'd like to see the report that has confirmed that as a result of some health care service in St. Joe's hospital that that individual has passed away. I haven't seen that, so I ask him to table it. With respect to the further protocol followed with respect to St. Joe's hospital, the Minister of Health can answer.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, to the Premier on what we all agree is a very serious issue. These are questions that Albertans want answered. Can the Premier tell this Assembly if any other local health professionals such as dentists were using the sterilization facilities at the Vegreville hospital?

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is an interesting question. I don't know the answer to that question. I will make inquiries. We do have the Health Quality Council on site now looking and talking with the people who operate the hospital and the region to find the scope of the investigation that they're going to undertake. Certainly, one of the things we'll want to know is to what extent the CSR in the hospital was used and to what purposes? But let's be very clear. This is not a situation where it is prudent for the opposition or anyone else to alarm Albertans. The look back that we're doing is being done because there were found to be inappropriate procedures followed, and it bears us to investigate and to let people know.

*Alberta Hansard, March 22, 2007 (unofficial transcript)*



## St. Joseph's General Hospital (Continued)

*Question asked during Oral Question Period of the 26<sup>th</sup> Legislature of Alberta, 3<sup>d</sup> Session from Ms. Laurie Blakeman, Hon. Member from Edmonton-Centre*

March 22, 2007

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The public health issues emerging in Vegreville are just the thin edge of the wedge. What about next week? Next month? The next town? Albertans are worried about whether this government is capable of anticipating future problems and producing a strategy to protect public safety. My questions are to the Premier. We are already aware of one patient who died in Viking after contracting MRSA at St. Joseph's Hospital in Vegreville. This patient was transferred several times between hospitals. How many other potentially infected patients were transferred from St. Joe's to other sites?

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is not a prudent thing to do. This is a very serious situation, and we have the Health Quality Council looking at it. We've made sure that no further incidents happen. We've made sure that the CSR there is shut down until the investigation is done and appropriate protocols are put in place. We don't know that anyone died of the thing. The hon. member has raised one individual situation and is taking that reference. We'll be happy to take that reference if you provide us with the details and investigate it and any others that people might bring forward. But it's not prudent to do this in an alarmist fashion. It's prudent to do it in a serious manner with an appropriate, responsible review alerting people to have blood tests done and following up appropriately.

**Ms Blakeman:** Again to the Premier. The East Central health region has lost 17 full-time registered nurses over the last year alone. It is common practice for staff to transfer between hospitals for shifts, especially when facilities are short-staffed. What steps are taken to reduce the risk of spreading MRSA if staff from St. Joseph's hospital rotate between facilities?

**Mr. Hancock:** Mr. Speaker, it is known and understood that the MRSA virus is one which is transmitted hand-to-hand or by touch and that the most prudent way of stopped the spread of the infection is by properly washing hands and properly disinfecting surfaces. That is something that every health professional knows and understands, and that's something that's being reinforced for them through this incident.

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you. A final question to the Premier. In Vegreville there hasn't been any sort of government response, public information session, or town hall held to reassure the Vegreville residents. My question is to the Premier: why has the Premier waited so long to make himself or government staff available for an information session to inform and reassure the people of Vegreville?

**Mr. Stelmach:** Mr. Speaker, we immediately sent professionals to assess the situation. They posted a public health order. A quality health council is there today interviewing people in the hospital and making sure that steps are being taken immediately to deal with this situation. Once further information is made available, we will, of course, communicate with not only the town council, the chamber, and all of those that may be interested with respect to what we're doing in their hospital at St. Joe's.

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**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government, which has included the Premier for 13 years, has spent that amount of time dismantling Alberta's public health care system. It has politicized the regional health boards. It's accelerated the privatization of health care to the detriment of our public quality system. Vegreville is only one symptom of the problems that have ensued. We have an opportunity here to fix this system before other problems arise. To the Premier: given that the Premier, along with the member from Brooks and other members of the so-called Deep Six, was part of the group leading the charge to cut essential health services, does the Premier accept responsibility for the inevitable outcomes of these decisions?

**Mr. Stelmach:** Mr. Speaker, first of all, the Vegreville St. Joe's hospital is not a private facility. Again, innuendo, misleading; giving information that is totally incorrect. Secondly, in 1993 the budget was about \$3.2 billion or so, 3.3. I believe over a period of time that first year about \$200 million was reduced, most of that in an administrative side. Since then, the budget today is of course the largest per capita anywhere in the country of Canada. I believe our health professionals are doing extremely well in this province. In fact, we have people coming from other provinces to access services here.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, this isn't an isolated case. The decision of his own government has resulted in patient safety problems at the Holy Cross, at the Calgary health region, and in long-term care centres across the province by dismantling the system's capacity to set and enforce standards. Will the Premier admit that the department of health needs the very capacity to set and enforce standards that this government pressed so hard to eliminate?

**Mr. Stelmach:** Mr. Speaker, the department of health has been doing a very good job. We've attracted some of the world's best, in terms of cardiologists, oncologists. I mean, this is where people want to practice. We have, of course, the Alberta medical research trust fund that again is attracting Nobel prize material, not only in research, but now we are benefiting from that research in terms of new medical treatments and pharmaceutical, you know, new drugs right here in the province of Alberta. I think we've come a very long way and are really a new face for Canada.

**Dr. Taft:** Mr. Speaker, the Premier has sidestepped the issue, absolutely completely. Will the Premier commit to re-assembling the centralized monitoring and enforcement standards in the department of hospitals that were dismantled by this very government in the 1990s?

**Mr. Stelmach:** What I will commit to is to ensure that we get to the very bottom of the situation in St. Joe's, so we put at ease other, of course, Albertans that may be accessing services in hospitals in this province and find out what the issue was, what the problem was, and make sure that it never happens again. That is what I'm committed to.

*Alberta Hansard, March 22, 2007 (unofficial transcript)*