New Brunswick Health Minister is “willfully incompetent” says doctor

By SUSAN O’DONNELL

Valerie Edelman and Dr. Adrian Edgar (left to right) with Clinic 554, this year’s Fredericton Pride Parade’s Grand Marshal. In this picture, Dr. Edgar is delivering the Grand Marshall speech at Officer’s Square in Fredericton. Dr. Edgar thanked the Fredericton community for supporting Clinic 554 and demanded that politicians take action to remove barriers to reproductive health care in New Brunswick. Photo by Douglas Mullin Photography.

Health Minister and lawyer Ted Flemming knowingly permits New Brunswick to contravene the Canada Health Act, the federal law regulating payment of health services. New Brunswick doctor Adrian Edgar says this indicates Flemming is “willfully incompetent” and has called for his resignation.

The Canada Health Act ensures that eligible Canadian residents can access health services approved by Medicare on a prepaid basis, without direct charges at the point of service. Most doctors across Canada operate from private facilities, billing their provincial government for Medicare services. In New Brunswick, the province pays for all Medicare services provided by doctors in private facilities, except abortions.

Several weeks ago, federal Health Minister Ginette Petitpas Taylor sent a letter to provincial health ministers asking them to respect the Canada Health Act requirement to pay for surgical abortions. However, Regulation 84.20, Schedule 2, paragraph (a.1) of the New Brunswick Medical Services Payment Act specifically excludes abortions performed outside of hospitals. Only three hospitals in the province, in Bathurst and Moncton, provide abortion services.

A panel of experts discussed the government’s contravention of the law at an event, “Intersections of Gender, LGBTQ2S+ Health & Reproductive Justice” in Fredericton on August 13 organized by Reproductive Justice New Brunswick (RJNB) and Fierté Fredericton Pride. Panel chair Jessi Taylor, a reproductive justice activist and formerly Education Program Manager at AIDS NB, explained that “reproductive justice” is bigger than pro-choice and refers to the ability to have children in a safe and healthy environment.

As an example, Edgar said the fee for a vasectomy is billable at 132 units whereas the fee for an abortion is 18 units, which does not cover the costs of staff or facilities required for the service. Thus the low fee structure is specifically designed to make it difficult for doctors to perform abortions. Additional fees are available to doctors performing both services but the basic inequity and discrimination persists. As a comparator, a specialist waiting on hold for 20 minutes while a telemedicine service is delayed for technical reasons is entitled to bill 20 units per each 15 minutes they sit waiting.

Why is there a fee for abortion if it is not allowed outside hospitals? This is another example of government incompetence, says Edgar. Schedule 2 of the Regulation under the Medical Services Payment Act specifically excludes “abortion, unless the abortion is performed in a hospital facility approved by the jurisdiction in which the hospital facility is located.” However, recently a new service code for “Medical management of non-viable/unwanted pregnancy” for family doctors to use, apparently outside of a hospital, is classified as an abortion, billable at 18 units. Edgar said, “if that seems confusing given the explicit restriction in the Act, it’s because it is. The Department of Health is trying to suggest that medical abortions are not abortions,” adding that the government is “persisting in their multi-decade attack on the services offered at Clinic 554 and the previous Morgentaler Clinic in every way they conceive of – even if it means contravening their own regulation.”

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Wolastoq Grand Council Chief Ron Tremblay. Photo byJJ Bear.

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Fracking announcement: Good news in an ugly package

By DALLAS MCQUARRIE

The August 12 announcement by Corridor Resources that it is shelving plans to frack for natural gas near Sussex was indeed welcome news. Not welcome was the slavish, disingenuous and vicious nature of the announcement itself.

In a quarterly financial report to investors announcing its decision, Corridor cited "regulatory uncertainty in New Brunswick." An August 13 CBC news report noted that the company says its decision is tied to provincial consultations with Indigenous people. Thus, Corridor is attempting to somehow assign the responsibility for its decision to Aboriginal peoples who are doing nothing more than ask that their legal rights be respected.

Intentionally or not, by linking its decision to provincial consultations with First Nations – the very folks whose land Corridor wants to frack – the company is bound to stir up resentment against Aboriginal peoples among the misinformed generally, and right-wing extremists in particular. What makes the announcement so distasteful and misleading is that in its rush to make Aboriginal people the scapegoat, Corridor ignored some ugly truths about the shale gas industry that are a big red flag for investors.

First, the finances of the shale gas industry are a financial dumpster fire that smart investors are avoiding. There is a myriad of reasons to not invest in shale gas, including both economic and financial conditions, climate change and all the scientific research to date (1,400 studies at last count) that has prompted many countries to ban fracking outright. Of increasing importance as deterrents to investment are the increasing number of legal cases, and the fact that many now say that fracking is a violation of human rights.

As well, the moment any move is made to frack in New Brunswick, there will be legal challenges to both the industry and the government that allows it. Most notable here is the lawsuit filed by NBASGA (New Brunswick Anti-Shale Gas Alliance) which is based on a mountain of peer-reviewed scientific studies showing the harmful consequences of fracking to people and the environment.

The bottom line is that anyone investing in shale gas in New Brunswick would demonstrate the truth of the old adage that ‘fools and their money are soon parted.’ But, of course, Corridor tried to off-load responsibility for its decision to First Nations, all the while ignoring the fact the industry itself is in a state of crisis. I don’t know whether Corridor was deliberately being racist in making Aboriginal peoples the scapegoat for its decision. Perhaps the company was only trying to prop up its own delusions – delusions the Higgins government has bought into 100% - that shale gas has a bright future and can be used as an engine of economic growth.

But the effect of Corridor’s dirty announcement will be the same as all the other times lies have been told about Aboriginal peoples, namely that First Nations will be blamed for something that was not their doing. Racists and those who just don’t get it, will say the First Nations are killing jobs and holding back economic development.

The truth is that shale gas is a catastrophe for climate change, public health and environmental stewardship. It is an industry of death serving those who value profit more than life itself. What Corridor should have said in its announcement was that at a time when climate changes poses an existential threat to us all, the shale gas industry only offers misery and pain on a highway to oblivion.

Dallas McQuarrie writes for the NB Media Co-op and lives on Mi’kmaq territory in St. Ignace.

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Shale gas opponents demonstrating outside a meeting between municipal government representatives and then Energy Minister Craig Leonard in Richibucto in 2013. Photo by Dallas McQuarrie.