Hospital worker blows whistle on spread of New Brunswick's mystery illness: Bombshell report

By TRACY GLYNN and ADITYA RAO

Premier Blaine Higgs during the 2021 state of the province address. Photo from the Government of New Brunswick.

A Vitalité Health Network whistleblower has told The Guardian that previously healthy young adults suspected of having the mystery neurological illness are experiencing rapidly deteriorating health and that the number of cases are growing.

As an example, twenty- and thirty-year-olds in New Brunswick, some of them caregivers, are reporting brain atrophy, muscle wasting, hallucinations, and insomnia, all neurological symptoms that are usually rare in young adults.

The whistleblowing hospital employee also does not believe it’s a New Brunswick disease. The employee told The Guardian’s Leyland Cecco in a story published on January 2: “We’re probably the area that is raising the flag because we’re mostly rural and in an area where people might have more exposure to environmental factors.”

Meanwhile, the Government of New Brunswick is blocking federal scientists, who are standing by to help, from supporting research into the mystery neurological illness dogging parts of New Brunswick.

According to a federal scientist quoted in The Guardian story, there are teams waiting and ready to begin conducting the research needed, but “New Brunswick has specifically told us not to go forward with that work.”

This bombshell report follows incendiary stories by The Walrus, The Guardian, and the Globe and Mail, in addition to another story by The Guardian.

Still, questions persist. Why is the Premier not allowing federal scientists into the province to investigate?

With at least nine cases involving two people in close contact, why is the Premier not launching an environmental study of the illness?

Caregivers of patients suspected of having the illness, including a nursing student in her twenties, have developed symptoms. What is the province doing to protect caregivers from the illness?

There are also unanswered questions about reporting the number of cases of the illness on the government’s website. The number, 48, has not changed since spring 2021. Multiple sources suspect that the cluster is likely to be as high as 150. This number does not take into account the cases involving young people still under investigation.

What will the government do differently to alert the public of a disease cluster in the future? Remember, the only reason we know anything about this mystery illness is a leaked memo to the press.

In a recent report by CBC’s Fifth Estate, several people within the cluster region who felt they were experiencing symptoms found it impossible to see a specialist because of long wait times. They also felt that practitioners dismissed their concerns.

The government, on the other hand, after continuously botching their COVID response, including over the Christmas holiday, has unsurprisingly offered no strategy to tackle this mystery illness.

Instead of calling for all hands on deck to investigate this mystery illness, the Premier is preventing scientists from doing their job, firing healthcare workers who deserve fair wages, and forcing hospital closures.

The Premier and his friends at the Irving-owned Brunswick News are focused on a completely different priority: enriching their business executive friends with money, by promoting privatized health care, never mind overwhelming evidence that a robust publicly-funded health care system would serve us all better.

New Brunswickers deserve answers and leadership. But it has become abundantly clear that Premier Higgs does not believe himself answerable to us – he answers only to the Ivings.

It seems everyone in New Brunswick is talking about tiny homes.

Fredericton entrepreneur Marcel LeBrun shared the stage with Social Development Minister Bruce Fitch and Fredericton MP Jenica Atwin on January 6 when they announced $1.4 million in forgivable loans for a 96 tiny home development near the northside Walmart. LeBrun’s 12 Neighbours Inc. is a not-for-profit organization that will provide affordable housing for 100-200 people in Fredericton – no small number.

The first 36 homes are scheduled to be operational soon. Tenants will pay no more than 30 per cent of their income in rent, the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation’s cut-off for affordability. The difference in rent will be covered by the provincial rent supplement program.

While tiny homes may provide affordable housing to some, this model is not without its limitations. Limitations that merit careful consideration as the popularity of tiny homes grows while the housing crisis deepens.

Tiny homes emerged in the 2010s as a (perhaps not so) green and minimalist alternative to suburban sprawl in the wake of the 2008 recession.

Municipalities, primarily in the US, turned to tiny homes to provide housing to folks experiencing homelessness. Canadian communities have recently been following suit, with Fredericton being the latest.

There are positive features of LeBrun’s homes. They will be insulated and connected to the city’s power grid and sewage system – a critical feature missing in many tiny home villages in other parts of North America. The project plans to include wrap-around services, meaning residents would be supported by a team of social workers, counsellors, and other professionals.

Still, LeBrun acknowledged in the press conference that these homes can support only one or two individuals at a time and are not meant for families or children. This means tenants in the 12 Neighbours community who wish to have children or live with their children will likely have to leave.

Women, who as a group shoulder more of the parenting work, will be disproportionately excluded from this model. Yet, lone female parents in the province experience some of the highest rates of unaffordable housing. Parents, generally, face discrimination in the rental market. Indeed, nearly 20 per cent of tenants who responded to the province’s 2021 rental market survey said that they could not find housing because they had children.

Living in tiny spaces can also carry health risks, including a specific risk of causing psychological problems. It is not easy to pack one’s life into a 250 square foot box. In an op-ed for the New York Times, a resident of a “micro-apartment” painted a rather grim picture of what life can look like in a tiny home, “where, even smell takes up space.” Gene Tempest, the author, wrote.

These limitations suggest the project is not a Housing First project, but a transitional housing project. Yet, it has been positioned within the evidence-based Housing First philosophy, which advocates for permanent housing as an immediate first step to solving homelessness.

Unsurprisingly, Barbara Poppe, a leading expert and an Obama White House advisor on homelessness, advised the city of Seattle against funding tiny homes (they did anyway),
Concerns about the disappearance of local news and the dominance of the Irving media empire bubbled up on January 10 when the Sussex Rotary Club held an online panel discussion entitled: “New Brunswick, News Deserts and Democracy.” “Our aim in this conversation is to take a reading on the health of the local news business across the province and to connect that, in turn, to the health of local democracy,” said moderator Michael Depp. “Does New Brunswick have enough local news?” he asked a panel of four journalists participating online via Zoom. 

“All of the community voices, all of the diverse voices are forgotten, we are not telling the stories of the communities,” added Vicki Hogarth, news director at CHCO TV, a non-profit, community television station in St. Andrews. Hogarth explained that on the one hand, some would argue that New Brunswickers are lucky to have the Irving papers to provide local journalism while others would see the dominance of the Irving-owned company, Brunswick News, as a problem. “You have one major owner who is in charge of most of the news in New Brunswick, so there aren’t a lot of diverse perspectives,” she added. 

James K. Irving’s Brunswick News, which publishes three dailies and about a dozen weeklies, owns every English-language newspaper in the province except for the Saint John Sun Times. Its publications include two French-language weeklies. In addition, the John Irving-owned Acadia Broadcasting operates 15 radio stations in Atlantic Canada and Ontario, four of them in New Brunswick. Two other panelists echoed Hogarth’s concern about the lack of media diversity. “I think Vicki hit the nail on the head,” said Eirk Gingles, founder of the online video news magazine Buzzloc.al.tv based in Moncton. He acknowledged that there are other provincial news sources such as the CBC, but suggested there aren’t enough points of view. “The slippery slope is that if you only get one side, then you just believe that’s the way it is,” Gingles said.

“There are so many rural areas in the province that rely on social media because they aren’t getting any local news coverage at all. We are certainly in a bit of a media desert,” he said. Tracy Glynn, co-ordinating editor of the non-profit NB Media Co-op, argued that the province does not have “a healthy media landscape” partly because stories about injustice, inequality and oppression aren’t being covered. “At the NB Media Co-op, we are embedded in a variety of local news businesses and political interests,” she said. “We work with groups of people who experience poverty, the housing crisis, temporary foreign workers and such, and we know that their stories are not being told,” she added. 

In an apparent reference to the Irving media empire, Glynn said, “I don’t think we can trust that the billionaires – billionaires that are especially implicated in the climate crisis – can deliver a story about the climate crisis.” Moderator Michael Depp picked up on Glynn’s comment as he directed a question to Jackson Doughart, editor-in-chief of Brunswick News. “Jackson, Brunswick News is owned by Irvings, speaking of billionaires, the province’s largest employer, an absolute powerhouse in the province across multiple industries. What is your editorial policy about covering Irvings’ businesses and political interests?” asked Depp. “I’ve been editor-in-chief for almost two years and I’ve never been told what to write,” Doughart replied.

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Financing local journalism

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Tracy Glynn said the NB Media Co-op is financed by donations from its members as well as from unions that represent a variety of workers including bus drivers, postal workers, health-care workers. Jackson Doughart said Brunswick News is mainly financed by advertisers and subscribers. He said the company had never had to lay off any employees and its salary is paid through a federal local journalism initiative grant. 

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Local news in decline

Figures published last month by the Local News Research Project at Ryerson University showed that between 2008 and 2021, 900 news operations have closed in 324 communities across Canada. Those closures have been offset somewhat by the launch of 177 new local news outlets in 125 communities. 

The figures also show that since the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, local news organizations that have permanently closed including one online/digital news source, one TV station, 10 radio stations and 52 community newspapers. Of those community papers, those community papers was the Sackville Tribune-Post.

One positive launch in the Tantramar region has been the launch of a community news service. With the help of a democratic licence grant administered through the Community Radio Fund of Canada as well as donations from residents, a new community news service in the Tantramar area is being overseen by Erica Butler.

Bruce Wark worked in broadcasting and journalism education for more than 35 years. He was at CBC Radio for nearly 20 years as senior editor of network program, The World at the CBC site and The World Times When a version of this story first appeared on January 12, 2022.