



December 19, 2017

REPRIEVE FOR BETTER PATIENT CARE

(Toronto) The Ministry of Health and Long Term Care has made a last minute extension for discussions on a new arrangement for the province's community medical laboratories today, until the end of January. Previously it appeared certain a deal that would have been poor for the province's community patients was to be pushed through the day before Christmas.

Alpha Laboratories is still asking the public and organizations in the health care sector to support its call to have the first government plan for laboratory testing in 20 years made transparent to the public. The laboratory, which has been in operation under the same family ownership for the past 45 years, had been worried it was being silenced for its opposition to a flawed plan which is harmful to patients. It faced a permanent loss of millions in funding if it did not sign on by noon Friday, more than three months ahead of previously indicated deadlines.

"There is something seriously wrong with the state of laboratory services in the province of Ontario, but it can and must be fixed," said Gerard Kennedy, OCLR spokesperson and CEO of Alpha Laboratories, at a media conference held in the middle of a local laboratory in Toronto today. "We are encouraged that the government is still prepared to address these issues. This is particularly important given the unique influence in our province of a legal laboratory cartel."

More than one million Ontarians are receiving substandard community laboratory services according to available data. Particularly important are an estimated 700,000 frail elderly and mobility-challenged patients living in the community who are forced to be brought down to testing centres, rather than getting lab service in their homes as used to be the case. Some 96% of this service was eliminated in the past several years. Larger laboratories, and not government, have been in control of the standards for laboratory service for Ontarians, as confirmed by the Auditor General's report this December. And larger laboratories, not government, have seen the savings.

One example is Jan Baker, 84 and a stroke victim. He has to be taken down to a public lab location by his wife, Gerta Valk, to check his blood thinner medication level four times a month, as his INR gets thrown off by his antibiotics and prednisone. Each time, Ms. Valk has to lift his scooter with its heavy battery into and out of the trunk and every trip is an ordeal. Taking blood is only a five minute procedure.

Some 7.5 million Ontarians use community laboratory services each year, and 80% of medical decisions rely in part on laboratory test results. Over 90% of services are provided by two large laboratory corporations, who are able to legally collaborate together over service areas and other matters. The OCLR estimates that the larger labs have been overpaid \$ 1 billion dollars over a 15 year period.

Members of the public with lab service issues are being asked to contact their MPPs over the holiday break.

The OCLR had announced a public education campaign, “Make Lab Tests Matter,” last Thursday at Queen’s Park to familiarize Ontarians with the potential to improve laboratory services without any new costs. Serious problems that one million Ontarians encounter include either missed tests due to out-of-pocket costs, having their tests not ready when they visit the doctor, having tests unnecessarily repeated, or being denied home testing services they need and being forced to attend public locations at great discomfort - all due to the previous “stripping down” of services under the control of larger labs. A new OCLR report, “Critical Values,” outlines the challenges and simple solutions for community medical laboratory service in Ontario and is available at www.labreform.ca.

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