

Editorial on Canadian Blood Services Saint John

By Senator Joseph A. Day

In the words of the Canadian Blood Services, their purpose “is to meet the needs and expectations of Canadians and Canadian health-care providers who require our products and services.” I’m not convinced that the decision to close the blood production and distribution side of the facility located in Saint John, the only such facility in our province, is meeting the needs of “Canadians and Canadian health-care providers” in New Brunswick.

The facility, which opened in 1984, sits across the street from the Saint John Regional Hospital, the province’s only tertiary care hospital which cares for critically injured patients and offers all major forms of surgery, including cardiac and neuro. The decision to consolidate blood services in the Maritimes would see the production and distribution part of the Saint John facility closed in 2012, and a new \$38 million facility constructed in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, that same year.

Doctors and health care providers have been speaking out against the move since the plan to close the facility was announced on March 31st, 2009. Canadian Blood Services has been criticised for not holding consultations with medical professionals before making their decision. Canadian Blood Services admitted last year that they were “slow off the mark” in consulting with doctors, only beginning to do so over the months following the announcement. However, one may question whether the CBS was sincerely considering the concerns of health care professionals in those late consultations, since they had already stated in April that the decision to close the facility in Saint John was “written in stone”. Seventeen New Brunswick physicians signed their names to an open letter sent to Canadian Blood Services’ board of directors at the end of October last year. In that letter they state unequivocally that in order to provide the best medical care to the citizens of New Brunswick, the Saint John facility must remain open.

When news of the decision broke in April 2009, it appeared to have been a conclusion that was reached on the basis of cost effectiveness. Based on that assumption, in October, the Graham government contacted CBS with a plan to share the cost of expanding and renovating the Saint John building in order to keep it from closing. The facility would have had to be expanded by only 13,000 square feet to match the size of the proposed building in Dartmouth; an expansion that the Saint John building was designed to accommodate. Dr. Graham Sher, CEO of Canadian Blood Services, replied that the decision had never been based on financial or budgetary considerations. He went on to state that the blood product requirements of Halifax-area hospitals are “slightly more” than those of hospitals in Saint-John, Fredericton, and Moncton, combined, implying that that was the reason for the proposed change. Surely that cannot be the case! One does not change a perfectly well functioning system on such weak reasoning as “slightly more” need.

So what is the real reason for the proposed move to Dartmouth? Is it based on efficiency of service? Considering the severe weather that New Brunswick experiences in the winter months, I’m not sure that, in an emergency, it would be more efficient to be relying on air transport of blood products from Dartmouth. As New Brunswick’s own physicians have stated, “Halifax and Saint John are respectively the second and third

foggiest airports in the country.” Not to mention that Nova Scotia’s Cobequid Pass has been closed four times in the past two years due to snow storms. Efficiency on paper is one thing, efficiency in practice is quite another.

Similarly, it would not be more efficient to establish a regional Blood Services office in a remote corner of the region. The new facility in Dartmouth would be servicing four major hospitals in Halifax, Saint John, Fredericton, and Moncton. Three of those hospitals are in New Brunswick, yet the new facility would be far away in Dartmouth. Saint John is a much more logical location.

New Brunswickers have always been generous donors of blood. Recently it was announced that over the Christmas period, the Maritimes donated the most blood in Canada, and New Brunswickers led the Maritime provinces in their generosity.

In the 2008-09 fiscal year, New Brunswick collected approximately 35,000 units of whole blood, but distributed approximately 25,000 units to NB hospitals. Even though CBS supports other parts of Canada with New Brunswick donated blood, we now need to import certain processed blood products. Fifty percent of platelets used in our province need to be imported. Platelets, the part of the blood that allows it to clot and stop bleeding cannot be refrigerated and have a shelf life of only five days. We cannot produce enough platelets from blood in N.B. because we do not have the equipment here in our province. Given that we have excess raw blood from which platelets could be produced and the five day shelf life of platelets, would it not make more sense to have adequate equipment in Saint John, thereby avoiding shipping the blood to Nova Scotia and shipping the platelets back to Saint John for redistribution, all within five days?

The centre in Saint John is not now a full production centre, and has not been for some time. For the past six years we’ve sent blood out to Toronto or Halifax to be tested, and for the past 18 months we’ve had to import half of the platelets we need from Halifax because we don’t have the necessary production equipment. This could be an indication that the decision to phase out Saint John was made some time ago. The facility in Saint John and a new facility in Moncton will remain open as collection sites. We are, after all, the best source of raw blood. We’re just not viewed by the CBS as an appropriate location to process that blood into products our citizens need.

The people of New Brunswick have shown their support to Canadian Blood Services, and the Red Cross before them, through their high level of donations. We need the Canadian Blood Services to be forthright with us by providing a reasoned explanation of how the proposed consolidation in Dartmouth meets “the needs and expectations of Canadians and Canadian health care providers”.

While Senator Day is a member of the Canadian Senate, this article is written from the perspective of a resident of New Brunswick.