

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



December 9, 2022

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HOSPITALS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, this week we questioned the Minister of Health with respect to emergency department wait times and ambulance offload delays—issues that are complex, no doubt, but major issues that need to be resolved. We know that lengthy emergency department waits and long ambulance offload times are the result of a chain of events where hospital beds are not available and people are stuck in emergency room beds and waiting rooms. Causing that is the fact that there are seniors waiting in hospital beds for a care home bed.

We know, from the latest figures we have, that, in October, 455 seniors were waiting for a nursing home bed. A lot of that is the result of scarce human resources and doctor shortages, which are causing many of these delays and emergency room closures. So can the minister let us know what is being done to make sure that seniors get out of hospitals and into care homes to get the care that they deserve and to free up scarce health human resources?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, I am more than happy to take that question today because that is something that we have flagged here for a number of months now. Actually, it has been more than a number of months, because during COVID-19, we actually moved seniors out of the hospitals in a rapid manner so that they could get into the community and get the care where they needed it—the level of care that they needed in the facility that they needed—whether it was at home with support, in special care homes, in special care homes with clinical services, or even in nursing homes. With the Omicron variant, it slowed down a bit because there were outbreaks in some of the nursing homes.

But that was one of the 20 items that I talked about, the long-term patients in the hospitals, in terms of trying to make the emergency rooms work faster. So we are working with the RHAs, we are working with the Special Care Home Association, and we are working with the nursing home association to accomplish that.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister says that the Department of Health and the RHAs are working on these issues. He has talked about the 20 items that were provided to alleviate pressures on ERs. But what I do not hear from this minister is his commitment to implementing the multidisciplinary care centres. That is something that we brought up when we first came back in October, and all parties seemed to be on board. This is not new. It is something that has been talked about for many, many years. We had nonurgent care centres in our 2018 platform, but we have not seen those created. We know that, as my colleague from Edmundston said yesterday, they do not have access to one in that area, causing unfortunate results and

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tragic events to happen. What is this minister doing to specifically work towards the creation of multidisciplinary care centres that will relieve pressures on our ERs and help solve this crisis?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to again tell you about some of the concrete things we are doing in this area. As a matter of fact, I was down to visit the clinics here, on both sides of King Street, with Dr. Sarah Davidson. There is the clinic that works with Horizon and the clinic that provides services for the vulnerable populations in New Brunswick. And that was one of the items, deferring people triaged at Levels 4 and 5 to the clinic in downtown Fredericton, to take stress off the emergency room.

By looking at some of the ideas, such as NB Health Link, which is very successful, we see that they are creating spaces for people to go to as opposed to presenting themselves at the emergency rooms, and we did that. I visited the one in Dalhousie, where there is a physical space that people can go to, as they hook up with Patient Connect NB, and that gives them that primary service that they need as opposed to going to the ER.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): The minister seems to acknowledge that this type of clinic is positive and will help relieve pressures, but I do not know why we are not hearing more about a rapid acceleration of the rollout into other areas of the province to make sure that everybody in New Brunswick has access to timely and quality care when they need it, Mr. Speaker.

Another issue that I want to raise is that there is a national shortage of pain and fever medications that is causing more pressures. Kids need to go to ERs because of fevers, but people cannot find the medicine for them to take. And with respect to antibiotics, it is the same thing. I can say from experience that my 9-year-old had to take pills because they had only one little bottle of liquid amoxicillin, which was insufficient, and no chewable medications. So they had to give pills to a kid. I want to know this: What is the minister doing to ensure that we have a supply of liquid antibiotics for children in the province?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, once again, thank you very much. I know that this is an issue that has come up before and has been in the media. Maybe, in order to look at some of these things, the member opposite should just turn around and ask the member for Kent South, who was the former Minister of Health under the Gallant government, in order to see what the Gallant government and his advisors did. You know, the member opposite was there. I see his picture up in the office. Again, they want to forget the past. They want to forget some of the things that they did when they were calling the shots. You know, Gallant and his advisors fired the Chief Medical Officer and went radio-silent on why they did that. So maybe you and the former advisors could tell us what is going on.



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(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): I will tell you this, Mr. Speaker. We on this side take health care seriously. We are doing the work to make sure that we are working with our counterparts and partners, whether it is ANB, Extra-Mural, the RHAs, all the physicians, or the pharmacists. We have expanded their scope of practice in order to provide good service.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Labour Minister was very sheepish when I asked him questions on Bill 23 earlier this week. So today, I will direct my questions to the Minister responsible for Opportunities NB (ONB), who was also the head of the biggest union in the country. The member for Saint John Harbour would know better than anybody else on the floor that consultation is the most important principle in a fair collective bargaining process. Knowing that this bill was being worked on since the summer and knowing that there was no consultation, I would ask this: Why did the Minister responsible for ONB give the Labour Minister the green light to come forward with scab legislation?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Mr. Speaker, I will say this again: Dial down the rhetoric. I do not know how many ways I can say that to this guy. He is trying to turn this into something that he is not—something that it is not. Actually, he is trying to be something that he is not too, but, anyway, that is a story for another day. At the end of the day, this is a united Cabinet in the fact that we are trying to bring some clarity to the issue around the rules of engagement. This is about the designated levels of service and the designated workers that both sides have agreed to put in place. It is just bringing clarity to the legislation so that the services that New Brunswickers deserve and require to keep them safe are protected. There is no one on this side who does not stand up for fair, free collective bargaining in this province.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, look who decided to come to work this morning. It would have been nice if you had spoken up when the gallery was full on Tuesday. But my question was for the Minister responsible for ONB. She spent a big part of her career defending public service employees and tradespeople and defending the values of unions.

There has always been a long-standing agreement in the province that unions would not picket in front of the workplace and that the province would not bring in scab workers. Obviously, with one swoop, the minister kind of kiboshed that whole agreement. Seeing as the Premier likes to tell us that he has a variety of voices around the Cabinet table, I am just

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wondering whether the Minister responsible for ONB actually voiced her concern when this was brought forward to Cabinet.

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I can assure you that on our side of the House, we act as a team and everybody expresses concerns and opinions.

You know, I find this funny. I do not know where this guy was. I was here all day on Tuesday. I addressed his questions in question period, with a number of people in the gallery, Mr. Speaker. He is standing up here, and he is trying to turn this into something that it clearly is not. The people of New Brunswick and the members of this House, at least on this side, are not going to let him get away with it.

This is about the protection of New Brunswickers by making sure that a designated level of service and of the workers required, which both sides have agreed upon, are respected and maintained and that we bring a level of clarity to the legislation so that this can be protected.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, Saint John is a union town, and there are a lot of public service employees in the riding of Saint John Harbour who would like to know whether their MLA stood up for them and spoke up when this bill was brought to Cabinet. We know that there was no consultation. We know that they are going to bring in replacement workers or scab workers. I am just wondering, when the minister came to the Cabinet table, what justification he used to convince his Cabinet members to vote in favour of this. They actually brought forward the designation level. So, I would ask this once again, to the Minister responsible for ONB: Did the minister convince you that the designation levels were low during strike periods? Is that the reason you voted in favour of this scab legislation?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, both my grandfathers were proud blue-collar unionized workers in this province. My father was a union business manager for the IBEW in this province. I have said it before, and I will say it again: I would never bring in legislation that would allow for any employer to break a strike. That is not what this is about. This is about maintaining a level of designation for both sides, Mr. Speaker.

I do not know what this guy is pretending to do. I know what is going on over there. He is trying to lobby for next time, Mr. Speaker. That is what this is all about. We know full well. I am going to tell you something, and I know that this is hard to imagine, but if I were a card-carrying Liberal, I would be locked and loaded and working hard for Susan Holt. I would not be supporting the pretend leader from Tracadie.

(Interjections.)

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Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order.

GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, last week, the Auditor General confirmed that staff members at Finance and Treasury Board and the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure consult with each other to look over tax sale candidate properties and identify environmental liabilities. Once done, they decide not to put them up for tax sale. That is right—insolvent owners of polluted properties stop paying property taxes, and the province just walks away, leaving these properties unchecked and abandoned, often in the middle of our communities. Can the Minister of Finance confirm that he agrees with the Auditor General that the province cannot divest itself of its responsibility for these properties and that leaving these properties unchecked increases the risk to the environment and the potential cost of remediation for the province?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question, and I thank him for his diligence as we continue to work on properties across the province, including one that is in the member's riding. As a matter of fact, earlier this morning, I asked for a copy of the draft report on that property. Yes, we continue to work on properties throughout the province. There are a number of difficult properties with environmental contaminations, with back taxes owing, and with more problems.

Through the department and through the work with the Department of Environment and Local Government, we continue to work together for the betterment of New Brunswick, for New Brunswick's environment, for New Brunswick's tax betterment, and—do you know what?—just because of the unsightliness. We continue to work to help the people of Bathurst, the people of Fredericton, and more people throughout the province who are dealing with some very difficult environmental situations and taxes along with them. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, as per the Auditor General's report and the New Brunswick *Escheats and Forfeitures Act*, the former Smurfit-Stone mill site in Bathurst is now considered an orphaned contaminated site. The Act gives full power to the minister to take possession of the property without going to tax sale. Can the minister confirm whether his department has started the process for the province to take possession of the abandoned Smurfit-Stone mill site in Bathurst?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Premier. I mean, Mr. Speaker. I gave you a bit of a job upgrade for a second.

I can confirm that, yes, we are looking at everything—and the member knows this—to do with the Smurfit-Stone property. I think that I have had nine meetings with staff and members in the last six months. Staff is talking to the city and to interested parties. We are

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trying to find out exactly how much damage has been done, and as I said, I have already asked this morning for a copy of the draft report. The final report, staff hopes, is going to be done in early January.

Yes, we are very aware of that property in particular and of a number of properties throughout the province. We are working with the Department of Environment to clean up the properties as best we can or to have the cities work along with us in cleaning up those properties. It is not just us. It is also the cities. A number of different groups have to work together, and we are trying our best to do that.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, last spring the minister said, in his own words, that he would have resolution on the Smurfit-Stone mill site in Bathurst by year-end or, if not, “come after me”. He repeated that twice. I told him then, and I repeat, that I have no interest in going after him. What I want is a resolution for my town, for my people. Again, I ask the minister to do the right thing. Do right by the people of Bathurst. They have been beyond patient. They have waited much too long. Take possession of the property immediately so that we can start remediating together. Remediating—how about that? Can the minister come through on his commitment to get this done by year-end?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you to the member opposite for the question, through you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, we continue to work on that property. Will it be solved by year-end? No, it will not be solved by the calendar year-end. I will tell you that. The draft report is what I am waiting for now, and then there will be the final report. Yes, we have to work together, absolutely. We have to work together—the government with the city, with the municipal government.

The property has different levels of contamination on one side of the river than it does on the other. It all depends on whether you are going to use it for a ball field, whether you are going to put a slab on grade, or whether you are going to do apartment buildings. It has the potential to be a wonderful piece of property, and I certainly will never deny that. It is right on the mouth of the river. It is a gorgeous spot if it is cleaned up properly, but there are different areas with different amounts of contamination. We are trying to find out exactly how much, and it is a slow process. But we are working for the betterment of that situation and for a number of situations throughout the province.

FIRST NATIONS

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): The tax agreements with Wolastoqey First Nations are coming up for renewal in early 2023, and the tax agreements with Mi'kmaw First Nations are coming up for renewal in late 2023. Will the minister please confirm the timelines and provide an update on the status of negotiations and other revenue-sharing agreements being contemplated? Thank you.

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Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. We are working very diligently with First Nations communities to actually forge a new economic partnership moving forward. In terms of the timelines, the agreements with Wolastoqey First Nations are expiring in January and the agreements with Mi'kmaw First Nations are actually expiring at the end of December next year.

However, on average, every single month, we are having about 23 meetings, which are subject-specific negotiations, bilateral negotiations, and trilateral negotiations. Our attempts and our support for a new economic partnership moving forward are really a priority for this government. Anything that the opposition can do in terms of helping to relay that message to First Nations and helping to get a fulsome proposal moving forward is certainly appreciated. Thank you.

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Would the minister be prepared to extend the expiry date for the tax agreements with Wolastoqey First Nations if requested so that it would coincide with the later expiry date for tax agreements, which is at the end of 2023?

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, PC): Thank you, again, to the member opposite for the question. Through the chair, there is no intent to extend any sort of date with respect to the tax agreements. As you know, they expired and were terminated in April. There was a consent order signed with MTI that actually had a fulsome schedule with respect to negotiations and extended the opportunity for funding and negotiations to take place through to the end of 2023. However, the same concept was not agreed to by the Wolastoqey First Nations in the consent order. It would have terminated at that time, thus the expiration of the agreement coming up in January. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If the tax agreement expires before negotiations conclude, will the provisions of the existing agreement remain in place?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, PC): Once again, thank you to the member opposite for the question. The tax agreements expired in April of last year. To your question, no. Thank you.

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ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, nations of the world are in Montreal right now at the UN Biodiversity summit to try again to reach an agreement on the steps needed to halt and reverse the deterioration of the web of life. Nature makes life possible on this planet. It is where we get our oxygen supply, it is where we get our water supply, and it is where we get our food supply.

Just over a year ago, the Standing Committee on Climate Change and Environmental Stewardship recommended some actions that could help make a difference now, right here in New Brunswick, and that would be measurable and effective. One of those recommendations was that forestry practices that are currently eradicating the diversity provided by the remaining old hardwood, mixed wood, and softwood forest on Crown lands be prohibited. It is Recommendation 8. My question is to the Minister of Natural Resources. Will he implement the committee's Recommendation 8? Yes or no, without too much elaboration, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, I have 60 seconds to answer and address whatever has come out of the member opposite, so I will take every little bit of that, and I hope that he is going to follow up with some more questions.

Mr. Speaker, when the member opposite asks a question like that, it would seem as though he has not paid attention to any of the work that we have done to put some world-class, leading conservation methods in place. When I heard the member from Memramcook make her member statement, it was embarrassing to hear her talk about the way that New Brunswick is apparently being painted as a destroyer, as opposed to about the work we are doing that is world-leading when it comes to conservation.

Mr. Speaker, we have embarked on a process that is historic as it relates to the diverse expansion of our natural landscape. We are working with species at risk. We are working to expand areas. We are working to protect old growth and deer wintering areas, and there are no lessons to be learned from the member opposite about conservation. Thank you.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): I will take that as a no, Mr. Speaker.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Recommendation 15 of the standing committee report calls on the Legislature to appoint a legislative officer charged with the responsibility for overseeing the stewardship of Crown lands and waters by April 1 of last year, with an appropriate budget. Mr. Speaker, just as we have an advocate for children,

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youth, and seniors, the committee felt that we should have an advocate for Crown lands and waters who reports to this Legislature. New Brunswickers with concerns about the state or the use of wetlands, forests, rivers, lakes, estuaries, bays, and even our shorelines could request an investigation. Moreover, that legislative officer would provide regular reports to this Legislature about the state of our forests and our freshwater and saltwater ecosystems and the sustainability of the resource use within them.

Will the Minister of Natural Resources table a bill to create an advocate for Crown lands and waters in New Brunswick? Yes or no?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): The member opposite loves to talk about reports and committees and all sorts of bureaucratic stuff that allow him to work in the world of the theoretical. I would argue that the world of conservation and the world of our natural resources have an advocate in this government, which has taken steps unlike any other government in the past. We have seen conservation forests drop under other governments. With this government, we are seeing them increase. In other governments, we have seen ignorance and a lack of attention to species at risk. We have seen this government put a strategy and a mitigation plan together for over 50 of the 80 species that are at risk. Work like that had never been done before.

The member opposite can talk all he wants about living in a theoretical world, but when we walked into this Legislature in 2018 and for every day since, we have said that we are going to put a practical foot forward and make sure that our time spent here has a positive impact, not only for today, not only for tomorrow, but for generations to come, Mr. Speaker.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order, please.

ROADS

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Maybe a little too much coffee this morning, minister.

Mr. Speaker, over the past few weeks, we have seen some pretty horrific car accidents due to icy road conditions and, unfortunately, half a dozen deaths. Many questions have been raised about the frequency of snowplowing and the application of sand and salt. We are hearing rumours about a possible directive to ration sand and salt and the centralization of decision-making around some of these key winter road maintenance functions.

My question for the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure is this. What steps has he taken to assure New Brunswickers that they can drive to and from work in relative safety?



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Hon. Mr. Carr (New Maryland-Sunbury, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really do appreciate the topic that the member opposite wants to discuss. We have discussed this over the past couple of days. You know, I was really hoping that my first set of questions here in the Legislature would be on a more jovial note and discussion, but they are not. People have died on our roads in this province, and I am terribly sorry for that. I have experienced such loss myself in the past.

I will say this to the member. I always have an open office and an open phone number for him and for other members. I find it terribly disturbing to understand or to hear that there are rumours about those trucks in the north or in any other district turning down the taps on their salt distribution. If the member has proof of that, I would like to see that memo as soon as possible.

MUSEUMS

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Thank you for the answer, minister. Now on to maybe a more jovial topic. I know that the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure has been in his role, as he said, for only eight short weeks. Recently, his colleague the Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture called out his department for being slow and ineffective. Has the new minister been able to identify just where these inefficiencies are, and has he started to address them so that he may at least have a chance of being a subcontractor on the museum project?

Hon. Mr. Carr (New Maryland-Sunbury, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Well, Santa has arrived, Mr. Speaker. How about that? You know, a lot of information is exchanged here in committee work and in question period and things like that, and things are said. Not at all times does the machinery of government work fast. I myself cannot confirm what the minister said last week because I did not read the transcript. If the member opposite would like to share that with me, I would appreciate it, over a coffee or otherwise.

However, Mr. Speaker, in my eight short weeks, I have been able to talk to the department staff about their ongoing initiatives and about some of the initiatives that the former minister put in place. There are some really good initiatives on process management, process improvement, and other things that involve many of the projects that happen in this province. If the member opposite would like to discuss the museum project in person and find out more about that, we would be more than happy to brief him off to the side. Thank you.

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Thank you very much for that answer. Mr. Speaker, this leaves one to wonder. This week, this minister spoke about several multiyear projects, such as the Centennial Bridge and the Saint John Harbour Bridge. In addition, the Minister of Finance, to much applause from his colleagues, announced \$62.4 million for the planning, design, and construction of eight new schools around the province. Then, there is

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the question of \$32 million for a new jail. Will it be enough? My question to the minister is this: Is he considering creating local boards of ordinary citizens to perhaps get these jobs done in a more efficient and effective manner?

Hon. Mr. Carr (New Maryland-Sunbury, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Well, I know that the MO of the Liberal Party is to create local boards so that all their friends can sit on them, Mr. Speaker, and that is just what the member opposite would like to see. We saw that with the Brian Gallant government and the Shawn Graham government. We saw that on the Atcon file, no less, with the government doling out jobs and money so that its friends could dip their fingers into provincial projects when there was no need to do it. Let's let the people who have the experience, the engineering consultants, and the people who are skilled in building these projects do just that and get the political meddling out of the projects.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am going to come back to the Minister of Health. He did not really answer any of the three questions that I had for him this morning. The one question to which I want to get a clear answer from him is with respect to children's medicine. It is a real problem. It is causing kids to get sick, to get fevers, and they are going to the ERs. I want to know what this minister is doing to assure New Brunswickers that he is doing everything in his power to make sure that our pharmacies are stocked with antibiotics to treat the illnesses that we are facing, such as strep and respiratory viruses—all of them. There is a triple threat. What is the minister doing to assure New Brunswickers that our pharmacies are stocked with the medications that we need? It is a clear question. I want a clear answer.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The province buys \$600-million worth of drugs every year and is making sure that the supply chain is adequate, whether it is for children's drugs, adults' drugs, the drugs to treat cancer, or whatever. We work with various suppliers.

It is interesting. You know, the opposition members really need to come clean on exactly where they stand on a lot of these health care issues. They stand up and say: We want to help. We want you to move forward. We want you to do everything. Then they say: But we are not going to support you on Bill 3. We are not going to support you on the privatization of clinics and in looking at various things in order to make sure that the health care system moves smoothly.

We can look at the work that is being done, such as moving long-term care patients out of the hospitals. Where do the members opposite stand on that? How far do you want us to go? Do you want us to move them without their will? I wonder if the opposition would consider that.

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Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister. The time for question period has expired.

