



Honourable Adriana LaGrange
Minister of Health
423 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T5K 2B6

January 9, 2024

Dear Minister LaGrange,

We are writing to you today regarding the serious allegations of unethical conduct by a senior member of Alberta Health Services and urging you to commit now to a public and independent investigation of these very concerning reports.

These reports have highlighted the very serious problems in your government's move to privatize healthcare.

As has been reported by The Tyee, Dr. Daniel O'Connell, Alberta Health Services' Head of the Ear, Nose, and Throat Section, has had concerns raised about his conduct in a whistleblower report made on Nov. 21, 2022.

This complaint was made by five surgeons who allege that Dr. O'Connell has been furthering his private interests by promoting the delivery of private surgery and clinical care at the Canadian Cancer Care (CCC) clinic, where it has been reported that he has a "formal relationship."

The complaint also alleges that despite claiming that he would remove himself from decision-making regarding the CCC clinic, Dr. O'Connell has not, and in fact, has been acting as almost an intermediary on behalf of the clinic and making and supporting decisions that benefit CCC and its employees directly.

According to AHS whistleblower guidelines, the investigation should have been concluded within 120 days. As of the sending of this letter, it has been 400 days since this complaint was sent to the AHS Chief Ethics and Compliance Officer.

This indicates that the best interests of Albertans are served by an additional investigation that is external and independent from Alberta Health Services.

In fact, during the time that this investigation was ongoing, Dr. O'Connell's position was made permanent.



This raises questions about whether Dr. Lyle Oberg, or other members of AHS leadership, including President and CEO Athana Mentzelopoulos, were aware of these allegations when this appointment was made.

In order to be confident that the investigation and its findings are completely independent of any form of interference, it should be done externally from the Government or anyone who received their appointment directly from the government, including Dr. Oberg or President Mentzelopoulos, or any of their appointees or hires.

Dr. O'Connell is alleged to have used his position to remove non-CCC clinic surgeons from their triage responsibilities and to have used his position to give preferential support in granting privileges in a manner that directly benefited the private clinic and obstructed privileges for those unaffiliated with the CCC clinic.

The complaint, which we have attached the text of to this letter, makes severe allegations that Dr. O'Connell has been acting in a manner that supports his private interests rather than the public health of Alberta Health Services or the best interests of patients.

In his position, Dr. O'Connell has significant influence over where patients will be seen and undergo surgery. Anyone with this sort of authority should be expected to operate with the rules and guidelines of AHS

The behaviour alleged by these whistleblowers is unacceptable. They require you to act by appointing a fully transparent investigation to ascertain if the concerns have merit and address them immediately.

Albertans deserve to know that they are at the heart of healthcare decision-making rather than someone using the system to promote and advance their personal financial interests.

As noted by University of Calgary law professor Dr. Lorian Hardcastle, this instance reinforces concerns by health policy experts of the issues with your government's move to expand private surgeries.

Dr. Hardcastle was reported as stating your government has "fed a storyline" to Albertans that it doesn't matter whether surgeries are delivered by a public hospital or private surgery facility, but said this matter would, "illuminate for the public that that is not the case. There are significant financial interests at play in these clinics. And the public should be concerned if decisions are being made with these private clinics in the back of someone's mind."

If you and your government is really focused on fixing the healthcare crisis that has developed under the UCP's watch, you will take concrete action to protect access for everyone and you will appoint an independent investigation that is free and independent and focused on getting the truth for Albertans.

We look forward to your response and the appointment of this needed independent investigation.

Sincerely,



David Shepherd
Alberta NDP Health, Primary and Rural Care Critic
MLA for Edmonton-City Centre



Luanne Metz
Alberta NDP Health, Emergency and Surgical Care Critic
MLA for Calgary-Varsity