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News | London

The world's worst waits

thyroid **CANCER CARE:** Queues for Canadian specialists are among the longest on the globe, and surgery waits in London are particularly bad, surveys show

By JOHN MINER THE LONDON FREE PRESS

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Canada has some of the longest wait times in the world for thyroid cancer surgery and waits in London are particularly bad, an international survey has found.

"One of the great things about being in London is you have experts, world-renowned experts in thyroid cancer, world-renowned nuclear

medicine doctors and excellent surgeons and doctors. There is just not enough of them," said Rita Banach, president of Thyroid Cancer Canada.

The survey by the Thyroid Cancer Alliance of nearly 2,400 thyroid cancer patients, released Saturday in Paris, was conducted in March 2010 and covered 40 countries.

A total of 274 Canadians participated in the survey.

Thyroid cancer is the fastest increasing cancer with the incidence up 10% globally in the past decade.

In a survey section that looked at how long patients waited to see a specialist from the time they discovered a suspicious neck nodule, the survey found Canadians have the longest waiting period.

Internationally, the survey found more than half of patients were able to see a specialist in less than 12 weeks. In Canada, 12% of patients were seen within the period.

In Canada, provinces measure wait times from the time a surgeon decides it is necessary to operate until the operation is done.

The wait time varies from 41 days at Women's College Hospital in Toronto to 278 days at London Health Sciences Centre and 289 days at St. Joseph's Health Care London.

"A patient could be easily waiting a year from the time they found the lump. That's serious," Banach said.

Londoner Elaine Hill knows first-hand how excruciating the wait for surgery can be.

Hill first noticed lumps in her neck in July 2008.

By the time she worked her way through the system from the family doctor to the specialist, from the specialist to the surgeon and finally to the operating room, it was November 2009.

"I want things to change for other people. I waited for a long time," Hill said Sunday.

Banach called the delay in Hill's surgery ridiculous.

She blamed a general lack of attention paid to thyroid cancer for the situation.

"We are the cancer that is the very last one anyone pays attention to because of our high cure rate. It is extremely frustrating," Banach said.

Though most types of thyroid cancers can be cured, there is one that is particularly deadly, she said. "You say your farewells as soon as you get the diagnosis."

London's long wait times for thyroid cancer surgery could be partly due to the city's reputation in the field, drawing patients from outside the region, she said.

"It is very highly specialized and you need to go to somebody who does thyroid cancer surgeries all the time."

Neil Johnson, vice-president of medicine services for both LHSC and St. Joe's, said the hospitals are concerned about the wait times.

"I can appreciate from a patient's perspective it is very troubling, very concerning, to have to wait any length of time, let alone the time that has been quoted," Johnson said.

Provincial and federal governments have invested in reducing wait times in the past few years.

"We have been doing our part in trying to move those wait times down, not only for this disease state but others as well. While all areas have made progress, we still want to make more progress," Johnson said.

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