

# A case study on the need for public trust in health care communications



Eastern  
Health

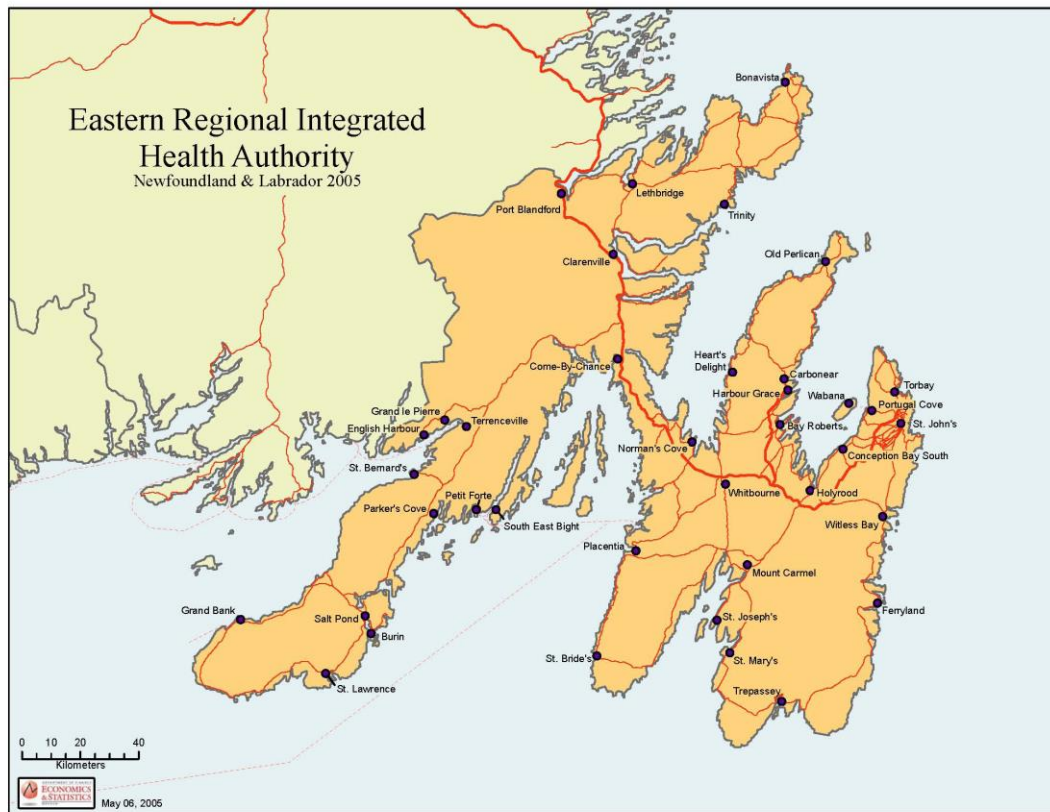
**Arthur W. Page Society  
Case Study Competition  
in Corporate  
Communications**

# Introduction

- Trust is the key element in any doctor/patient relationship.
- That trust was violated when a Canadian health care organization failed to disclose errors made in one of its laboratories.
- Those errors may have contributed to the deaths of more than 100 cancer patients.
- This case study reflects on the significance of transparency and accountability in health care communications.

# Eastern Health, the largest health care organization in Newfoundland/Labrador, Canada

## *Catchment area*



- Serves 290,000 people in 30 communities
- Includes seven acute care hospitals and a cancer center
- 12,000 staff
- Health care in Canada is available to all citizens and paid for by taxes.

# Hormone Receptor Testing

- An important test in making decisions about treatment for breast cancer is to assess whether or not the tumor is being ‘fed’ by hormones.
- If it is, the patient is a candidate for anti-hormone drugs that may slow progression of the disease.
- A relatively complex lab procedure is used to test the tumor tissue.

# Phase one of the crisis

## *Initial choices*

- **2003** – concerns raised by a lab reviewer that the tissue testing lab at Eastern Health is not up to standard
- **May 2005** – first inaccurate hormone receptor test result discovered – five more quickly identified
- **June/July 2005** – Eastern Health sends 1,000+ tissue samples to Toronto, Ontario for re-testing

# Phase one of the crisis

## *Initial choices cont'd*

- **October 2005** – re-test results start coming back – Eastern Health decides to contact patients individually by telephone, but say nothing publicly
- **October 2005** – within days, media break the story – highly critical local and national coverage follows

# Phase two of the crisis

## *Possible deception revealed*

- **December 2006** – Eastern Health holds a media briefing providing *some* data about the patients affected
- **May 2007** – court documents reveal that 42% of the lab results were wrong, information Eastern Health withheld in December
- Another wave of critical local and national media coverage follows

# Phase three of the crisis

## *Commission of Inquiry*

- **July 2007** – Government establishes a Commission of Inquiry
- **July 2007** – Eastern Health's CEO resigns
- **March 2008** – Commission begins its hearings – so far, 108 women whose initial test results were inaccurate have died
- Patients, hospital officials and government officials take the stand and provide detailed, often emotional testimony that is covered by local and national media



# Commission of Inquiry

## Highlights of testimony by patients

- “My trust is gone,” says one of the survivors about Eastern Health.
- “They should have told us immediately and explained what they did and didn’t know, because we’re not children,” says another.
- “Eastern Health, please get out there and talk to us and assure us that we’re going to get through this and it’s going to be OK.”

# Commission of Inquiry

## Highlights of testimony by EH representatives

- “We’re not trying to cover up anything here; we’re trying to take care of patients,” says an Eastern Health oncologist.
- “It’s great to be a Monday-morning quarterback now,” says EH’s CEO. “But I confess to you that we didn’t provide full detail and I apologize for that.”
- In an E-mail, EH’s Director of Strategic Communications calls a patient, a cancer society representative and a lawyer “school yard bullies”.

# Teaching Components

## Three relevant concepts

### 1. **The importance of intangible assets in the public health care sector**

*A good reputation is the most important intangible asset in health care because:*

- It builds patient confidence and staff pride, and sustains the organization during times of crisis.
- A reputation for being a well-run institution with top staff attracts more public and private funding.
- Being considered a great place to work enhances staff recruitment and retention. That is critical during a time of physician and nurse shortages.

# Teaching Components

## Three relevant concepts

### 2. The importance of public trust

- “Trustworthiness is the cornerstone of the practice of medicine ... in the absence of a trusting relationship the physician cannot help the patient and the patient cannot benefit from the relationship.” – *College of Physicians*
- A trust “deficit” develops when there is a gap between what the two parties – the patient and the caregiver – want from the relationship.

# Teaching Components

## Three relevant concepts

### **3. The importance of staff engagement in the organization's mission, vision and values**

- Staff members shape the organization's reputation through the many interactions they have with patients every day.
- “A company's true character is expressed by its people. The strongest opinions – good or bad – about a company are shaped by the words and deeds of its employees.” – *Arthur W. Page*

# Discussion Questions

Eastern Health says it made the choice not to go public about the errors because:

- they did not want to alarm patients unnecessarily
- they also wanted to inform the patients personally and confidentially.

**Question 1:** What do you think the ethics of disclosure should be? Do you inform patients and tell them they may have been affected, thus causing them worry and stress that may be unwarranted? Or do you take the risk that the information may leak, and wait to contact the patients when all the information is available?

# Discussion Questions

Laboratory leaders were aware of these problems two years prior to the eruption of the crisis, yet they decided not to inform senior leaders at Eastern Health and instead tried to work independently to correct the situation.

**Question 2:** What does that tell you about how the laboratory leaders perceived their role? As a CEO, how would you help staff understand when to take care of issues themselves, and when to flag problems so others can help?

# Discussion Questions

The Eastern Health lab where the errors were made had serious problems including being understaffed and failing to keep up with developments in its field.

**Question 3:** How do you think a cash-strapped health care organization should address these problems?



# Discussion Questions

Fifteen months into the crisis, Eastern Health held a media briefing and intentionally withheld information that would have revealed the full scope of the problem.

**Question 4:** When this omission became public, how do you think it affected the relationship between the patients and their caregivers? Between Eastern Health and the media/community?

# Discussion Questions

It appears that at least some components of Eastern Health enjoyed strong public support prior to this crisis.

**Question 5:** As a relatively new entity with a large number of sites and a wide range of programs, how would you make optimal use of Eastern Health's intangible assets to enhance its reputation?

# Discussion Questions

Staff members can be effective ambassadors for organizations like hospitals.

**Question 6:** How would you advise Eastern Health to utilize this potentially valuable, intangible asset?

# Discussion Questions

The Ministry of Health in Newfoundland/Labrador contemplated, and then rejected, the idea of mounting an advertising campaign to restore faith in Eastern Health and the cancer care system in particular.

**Question 7:** What strategies and tactics would you recommend to Eastern Health as they try to rebuild their reputation? Use the Page Principles to structure your answer.

# Page Principles

## applied to Eastern Health

### 1. **Tell the truth.**

Cooperate fully with the Commission of Inquiry.  
Review and evaluate what went wrong.

### 2. **Prove it with action.**

Follow up on all the Commission's  
recommendations and report changes made.

### 3. **Listen to the customer.**

Establish mechanisms and forums for formal  
community engagement.

# Page Principles

applied to Eastern Health

## 4. **Manage for tomorrow.**

Develop plans to manage future issues, for example, the shortage of health care professionals and the importance of being an employer of choice.

## 5. **Conduct public relations as if the whole company depended on it.**

Public relations, community relations, communications and risk management must all be high priorities.

# Page Principles

## applied to Eastern Health

### 6. **A company's true character is expressed by its people.**

Establish an ongoing reputation management strategy that emphasizes story-telling and the dedication of Eastern Health's caregivers.

### 7. **Remain calm, patient and good-humored.**

When the Commission issues its final report, EH must respond appropriately and focus on rebuilding its reputation for the future.

# Susan Bonnell

*former director strategic communications, Eastern Health*



“Eastern Health communications official Susan Bonnell completed her testimony at the Cameron inquiry in St. John’s today, but there was no apology to the three people she likened to “schoolyard bullies.” Asked by Eastern Health lawyer Dan Simmons if she had any final comments, Bonnell just thanked the inquiry for the opportunity to testify.”

- St. John’s Telegram, March 6, 2008