

TOP STORY

Bring on healthy review

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The Palliser Health Region's former chief medical officer — now a Calgary Liberal MLA — thinks there's clear evidence that not all nine provincial health regions have been monitoring the checks and balances in their regional systems.

"Public confidence depends on that continuous monitoring to ensure that we do the right thing and invest our dollars in the public interest," Dr. David Swann told the News in a telephone interview Thursday.

He was referring to a recommendation this week from the Health Quality Council of Alberta which wants to conduct a sweeping review of the province's health regions. The recommendation came after it released a report Wednesday identifying shoddy infection-control practices in the East Central Health Region.

The health council's chief executive blamed a "turf battle" and lack of a "patient-safety culture" for poor sterilization standards at St. Joseph's Hospital in Vegreville.

The report also raised questions about whether the CEOs in the health authorities were properly selected and trained; whether public safety is really a number one priority; and the need to establish province-wide standards.

"I think turf is always a challenge when you're dealing with human institutions that have pride and control and don't necessarily have all the facts," continued Swann.

"That's why we need objective monitoring and honest reporting and accountability throughout the system."

Swann also thinks it's imperative that health region CEOs have some health background and a real sense of what the key issues are and what the main threats to public health are.

He'd like to see at least some regional health board members elected. Without that, there'll always be a question about whom health boards are accountable to, and whether they're really just creatures of the provincial government and accountable to only the provincial health minister, he added.

"I certainly favour a more democratic approach to one of the largest budgets in any region," he stated. "We elect school board members, why aren't we electing regional health board members?"

For Swann, the freedom to report objectively is especially necessary for chief medical officers. He stepped down as chief medical officer for Palliser some six years ago following what he viewed as political interference regarding his support of Kyoto.

"I would hope that things have changed in that respect and that the medical officer of health is entirely free to speak out on issues of concern on public health and safety," he added.

Carol Secondiak, chair of the Palliser Health Region, said she's not afraid of any review by the Health Quality Council.

"We've got a great history of not having any problems with infection rates and that's good," she said Thursday. "We have a quality control committee that gives reports to the board every meeting and we also have a patient safety council that we watch like a hawk — so we would never run into that kind of a problem."