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RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

TUESDAY, 11 MAY 2021

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Public Safety and Attorney General.

Mr. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The members from Charlottetown-Belvedere and Mermaid-Stratford asked a number of questions related to co-ops last week.

Staff in the Department of Justice and Public Safety addressed the issues related to the Lower Montague Trailer Park Co-operative when it was brought to their attention last year. As a further update, the co-op was dissolved and public notice was issued in the *Royal Gazette*, April 24th, 2021. This is because they did not file annual statements for several years.

I would also add that if the Island co-ops have questions, I encourage them to reach out to staff by phone or email.

The Member from Mermaid-Stratford also asked about evictions and appeals. As the member knows, the Minister of Justice and Public Safety and the Attorney General does not have the authority over legal administrative process of evictions and appeals.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker.

It really does feel like we're approaching the beginning of the end of the COVID-19 pandemic and if we keep our guard up and we don't make any mistakes, Prince Edward Island could weather this entire episode almost completely unscathed. That will be something to be collectively enormously proud of, but we're not there yet.

Greatest threats during COVID-19

Question to the Premier: What sorts of mistakes do you see as the greatest threats to PEI slipping up and what is government doing to get us all through these last few months of potential peril?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: I thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition for the question and part of the preamble is true; we've done a great job here, although I don't know if we're through it unscathed. I think it's had an impact on everybody in one way, shape or form, but certainly, from a health perspective, we've done extremely well.

I think I would continue to be wary of COVID fatigue within those of us here and those who are travelling to and from here. I know the protocols and safety measures are challenging and they're disruptive and they have made us do things that we haven't normally done.

So, I would wholeheartedly agree that not dropping the ball at this point – to use the sports analogy, which I often do, let's not spike the ball on the two-yard line here; let's run it over the line. But I think just continue to keep your guard down, get vaccinated, continue to practice the health protocols, and follow the advice. I think we can see the end of the tunnel and let's get there safely and be jubilant when we do.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

I have a friend who's really careful about following all the rules, and in many respects, she's a model citizen. They were actually one of the – they were at one of the recently announced exposure sites, but not on the day initially reported, so they went about their regular life, safe in the knowledge that they had not been exposed and that they pose no risk to the community at large.

But when the date was later amended, that person was put squarely right in the middle of the time of exposure. On Friday, Home Hardware had a message on Facebook

asking for clarification from the Province on whether the exposure was on Wednesday or Thursday, as Home Hardware was initially told that Wednesday was when it happened, but the public notice from the government said Thursday. It was Monday before the Province issued a correction.

Correction date to public exposure list

To the Premier: Why did it take two and a half days to make that correction, thus putting our community at what was an entirely avoidable risk?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, I'm not aware of the particular details in this case, but I will get some more information from Dr. Morrison and share it with the member in this House.

I think through the contact tracing efforts that we do, we try to do this in real time. We try to collect as much information as we can in real time. I think anyone in here, if they were asked to tell us where you've been for the last 72 hours exactly, you might need a little bit of time and you might be a little cloudy on some of that stuff. Perhaps that's part of the reason why this change.

As to the whole discussion around why it's taking so much time, I'll need to get back to the hon. member with that, but I do know the people in public health and all of those who are part of our effort for COVID are working 16, 18 hours-a-day and they're trying to do this as quickly as possible. They're the first to admit that they haven't batted a thousand, but I think our batting average is pretty strong here in this province.

I'll get more information for the member and share it with this House.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

I absolutely agree, Premier. Our public health office has done an extraordinary job and all of the other people who have contributed to keeping us safe over the last

year and a bit, but I don't think the confusion lay here with an individual, uncertain about when they'd been at Home Hardware. I think the confusion lay in a conflict between the message that government gave to Home Hardware and then later the announcement that went out publicly.

Dr. Morrison has said that we are one bad decision away from a situation like we see in Nova Scotia. And, of course, the new variants of concern which continue to evolve and to appear and are substantially more transmissible and, in some cases, more deadly than the original virus. That all underlies the need for continued vigilance by each and every one of us. Government clearly has responsibilities here, also, in creating border controls, for example, and reacting to keep our communities safe as circumstances change.

One of those responsibilities is to provide accurate and clear information.

Providing of accurate info to Islanders

To the Premier: When and how did government become aware of this mistake?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Once again, Mr. Speaker, I would clarify. I wasn't indicating that the individual you say who was following the rules had their days mixed up. I think, through the contact tracing, sometimes information changes when it's gleaned by the public health officer. I know I've talked to Dr. Morrison many times. When somebody tests positive, sometimes it's almost like an episode of *Columbo*, essentially, where you keep going back and getting more information so it changes a little bit.

I do agree wholeheartedly with the hon. member. Government needs to be as accurate as possible, as quickly as possible and we endeavour to do that. As I say, in this particular case, I'm not sure of the details. I'll need to find out exactly what happened and I will bring that back to the Legislature.

I would again say, we have done a pretty remarkable job over the last 15 months in

providing that information. I think we're fortunate because we have, perhaps, the most engaged population per capita by province than anywhere in the country. I will get more information and share it with the House, hopefully quickly here.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

Ms. Altass: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This sitting, I've asked the Minister of Health and Wellness a number of questions about exit surveys that are supposedly being completed by health care professionals who are leaving practices on PEI.

We've been told that exit surveys have not yet been completed with the two surgeons recently announced as leaving Prince County Hospital. However, we know these are not the first two doctors to leave in recent years. Sadly, not even close.

Number of exit surveys with departing doctors (further)

Question to the minister of health: When exactly did we start conducting exit surveys with health care professionals leaving Health PEI and how many exit surveys have been completed?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

It was one of the first things that I put through to the department when I became Minister of Health and Wellness, was just to reiterate the importance of carrying out these exit surveys. Certainly, they have been done since that point in time. The member references physicians who have tendered their resignation from Prince County Hospital. At this point in time, those resignations become effective at a point down the road, but I have been assured that those exit surveys will be completed. When I do have the compilation, obviously, we'll not be able to provide anything with details as far as names go, but certainly we'll be tabling that information in the Legislature.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

Ms. Altass: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I find it surprising and disappointing that if the minister is stating that exit surveys have only started being conducted when he became the minister of health. It was my understanding those have been happening throughout the duration of this government's tenure. That is surprising to hear.

Considering that the retention of PEI health care professionals is a top priority for this, minister, I'm sure he'll be able to answer a few more very simple questions about the information being gathered.

It's not simply enough to be conducting surveys, but it's also important to ask good questions and provide opportunities for open-ended responses.

Requested info and tabling of exit survey

Question to the minister of health: What information do you collect on the exit surveys and can you table a blank exit survey following Question Period?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I just want to provide a little clarity with regard to the answer to the hon. member's first question. It was one of the first things that I did when I became Minister of Health and Wellness to ensure that those exit surveys were being completed and were being carried out. I'd be more than happy to bring back information as to when they did start.

Yes, I would be happy to provide a blank copy of the information requested in exit surveys.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

Ms. Altass: Mr. Speaker, I certainly would have hoped that questions that the minister would have asked would have also included what did we find from the exit surveys that we are conducting; what are the problems that are being identified.

Retention of health care workers is not just a concern for physicians; it's a concern across a number of health care professions.

Classifications to complete exit survey

Could the minister tell us what classifications or types of health care professionals are invited to complete exit surveys?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The member is absolutely correct; it's not just a challenge with regard to recruitment. We have to do our very best as with regard to retention as well. That is absolutely one of the main reasons that we need to continue to do exit surveys, is to determine where we can improve upon, what areas that we're doing really well in, what areas are we doing so-so, and what areas can we improve in. That is part of the whole retention strategy of government, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

Ms. Altass: Mr. Speaker, I have to say I have found it quite concerning the number of times that I have asked about exit surveys in this House, and yet, we have yet to hear any information at all about what the findings are from these surveys; what have we learned and what is being done to address the issues that are causing health care professionals to leave Health PEI.

This is incredibly important.

Feedback from exit surveys

Question to the minister: Have you personally read any exit surveys or any

reports summarizing the feedback received from exit surveys? What have you learned?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As I said in my previous answers to the hon. member, yes, they are extremely important. Have I reviewed each and every exit survey? I have not. I do have faith in our professionals that are carrying these out, that are doing the analysis on them.

As I had indicated in a previous answer to the members questions, when information is compiled that does not identify any individual workers that had been employed or are employed with Health PEI, I will be more than happy to table that information.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

Ms. Altass: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I have received numerous messages from health care workers about the need to improve working conditions in Island health care. However, the health care professionals reaching out to me often request confidentiality, which suggests that they have a fear of reprisal for speaking out. Normally, workers only raise their concerns externally if they have been unable to resolve them internally.

Safety to health care professionals

Question to the minister of health: What are you doing to ensure health care professionals feel safe and supported in expressing their concerns, whether those concerns are expressed internally or externally to Health PEI?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I think that we have to look right now at the situation here in PEI as compared to other

jurisdictions right across the country and right around the world. Due to the diligence, due to the extremely hard work of our health care professionals right across the board, we – as in statements and greetings earlier today with regard to nursing, but in other aspects, other professions within the health care system, because of that dedication, because of that working 15, 16, 18 hours-a-day, we are the safest jurisdiction in Canada and in the majority of the world, without a doubt.

So I do want to express that thanks to our health care workers, as the minister.

With regard to – I think it's important for each and every one of us, as MLAs, to always be open to hearing feedback from any constituent irregardless of what profession they may be in, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Ms. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Over the last couple of months, I've heard from Islanders who would like nothing more than to speak out about the challenges and issues that they face in their workplace, but they fear repercussions if they do.

To my great surprise, when I spoke to staff employed at Health PEI, they kept referring to a pledge that they had signed when they were hired that forbids them from speaking out. I couldn't believe that was true, so I did some digging, and having done so, I can understand their concern.

Pledge of confidentiality and concerns

Question to the minister of health: Are you concerned that the pledge of confidentiality that each of your staff signs can limit their ability to bring forward concerns?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I think a pledge of confidentiality with any government employee, and certainly within the health care system – there are major

implications with regard to that confidentiality. We have to always be prepared and make sure that patients' confidentiality is paramount, that it is protected, but as I had said previously, I think it is important also, as MLAs, as elected officials, to always be open to hearing that feedback.

I do appreciate the two members from the official opposition that have brought this forward. Obviously, constituents do feel comfortable in reaching out and providing their concerns to the members.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Ms. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I absolutely agree with the minister when he's saying how important it is to protect patient confidentiality, but that's actually not what our confidentiality clauses say. I've compared them with other jurisdictions that expressly spell out the need for patient confidentiality, but ours are different. Ours says all confidential information.

I'm just wondering if the minister thinks that this could lead to people feeling they can't come forward and express their concerns.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I think the member – when she states all confidential information, it certainly encompasses a very wide range, but again, we do have to ensure patient confidentiality, and with that, as the member had put forward there, all aspects of a confidential nature, basically – I'm paraphrasing her to a certain extent – but that has to be front and centre with all of our health care workers – is the confidentiality of patients.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Ms. Lund: Mr. Speaker, my concern here is that when the language is so broad that we're talking all confidential information, you can understand why a health care worker would feel that if they come forward and express a concern, there is a possibility that they will face repercussions from their employee.

Question to the minister of health: Will you confirm for all government employees right now that they have the right to come forward and state any concerns that they have without fear of discipline?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I think it's one of the things – like we had talked earlier here this afternoon with regard to exit surveys. I have indicated before that I think one of the things that we need to do is not only with regard to exit surveys, but also as to provide the opportunity for health care workers right across the board to be able to provide feedback on positives in the workplace, on negatives and challenges that they have. I certainly do appreciate where the member is coming from and it's something – I think that we can do better on this.

Maybe it is through these retention surveys that would be of a confidential nature, that would allow employees to put forward their concerns, their suggestions, their challenges – but it would be in a confidential manner, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Ms. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I understand the value of exit surveys and my colleague has brought this up a lot, but wouldn't it be more beneficial to hear these things before health care workers quit?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

That's absolutely where I was coming from in my previous answer – was just not only looking at exit surveys, but we do need to look at retention, too. Part of that retention is to give health care employees – health care workers – the ability to provide feedback while they are still employees of health and wellness. I think that is a very important aspect of it. For them to be able to do it in a confidential, non-identifying manner would be paramount to me, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton.

Mr. Hammarlund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

One of the limitations of this Legislature is that sometimes the questioner does not get a chance to repudiate a wrong answer or point out, that there was no answer at all. Such was the case last week when I asked the Minister of Agriculture and Land if he could explain why he thought double glazing, as specified in the code, was an example of code innovation, even though it was common practice 40 years ago when this building we stand in was renovated.

Triple glazing in building code (further)

Question to the minister: Please explain why ancient double glazing is innovative when what we need is triple glazing and triple glazing is readily available.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Land.

Mr. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'll try to be as clear as possible. Triple glazing is the way we're going and it's the way of the future, the way we can help efficiency on this Island with our energy. That's the way the National Building Code is going and I hope we can help a fulsome conversation with the member about other ideas going forward.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton.

Mr. Hammarlund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you to the minister for the answer. I'm really looking forward to working with you and I think, to work together, not only in the Legislature, but consult with homeowners, builders, contractors, is really important as well.

Responding to needs re: homeowners and wood harvesters

Question to the minister: Do you believe in responding to the needs of local homeowners and wood harvesters?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Land.

Mr. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The department of land is always meeting with experts, meeting with industry, with changing products, changing innovations so the code can be as proactive as possible and, of course, the homeowners are front and centre of the importance of the code. The code is there for the protection of the homeowner, to ensure quality builds on this Island so we can have efficient homes for the next 100, 200 years, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton.

Mr. Hammarlund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and thank you, minister.

I agree, the code is a critical element in quality building.

Last week, the minister indicated that one or more sawmills were in the process of developing a stamping system for their lumber products at their mills. This is great news, but does not answer my concern, nor will it necessarily produce cheaper lumber. Why my neighbour went one step further and built his own sawmill, why would we not encourage such entrepreneurs?

Homeowners use of own standing wood

Question to the minister: How can rural homeowners with their own standing woods harvest their trees for lumber using the small, portable sawmills now available?

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Land.

Mr. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I know for a fact, I live, myself, in a house that was built in 1865 and there's a lot of unstamped lumber in that house.

I understand the member's concerns with the price of lumber going through the roof right now, with the increased building across not only Prince Edward Island, across Canada. It's become a prime investment in lumber. We are working with the Maritime Lumber Bureau to get local sawmilled lumber stamped here in this Island so people have different options than just having to buy stamped lumber. They can get their own lumber stamped.

For rural Islanders, I think they need the insurance, the liability of stamped lumber. I do understand the member's argument, but I think, for the liability of going forward, we need stamped lumber.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton.

Mr. Hammarlund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

New Brunswick announced last week that it will retain an exception in the building code for the use of local unstamped wood for secondary and recreational buildings. This has many benefits, including local economic development with local mills and shorter supply chains, which would reduce emissions and costs.

Use of unstamped wood in New Brunswick

Question to the minister: Would you follow the lead of our colleges in New Brunswick and create an exemption in our building code to allow the use of local unstamped

wood for secondary and recreational buildings?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Land.

Mr. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I don't think we have to follow the lead; we're already doing that with agricultural buildings being outside the building code. Small square footage buildings such as mini barns, storage sheds, recreational buildings – all can use green lumber.

We are progressive on this front and we're trying to do the best for all Islanders.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I was recently contacted by some constituents sharing concerns about misuse of furnace fuel and marked fuel on Island roadways. Furnace fuel is sold at a lower rate with reduced tax because it's primarily designed to heat home and buildings. This form of fuel when burnt consistently in vehicles can harm our environment.

Marked fuel is also a program designed specifically to help farmers, fishers and other selected industries offset their fuel costs of their operation.

Misuse of furnace fuel or marked fuel

Question to the Minister of Finance: Are you aware of any concerns surrounding misuse of furnace fuel or marked fuel on Island roadways?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question.

Our department hasn't received any enquiries or concerns lately that I'm aware of, and I get all the emails.

Hon. member, it's something we've discussed here in the House. We want to do what we can for farmers. We'll continue to

do that, hon. member and we are working on that legislation and bringing it forward.

If you have any complaints, then please forward them onto me.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

These individuals who raise these issues with me believe there are widespread cases of abuse occurring where fuel is not being used for its intended purpose, which is likely a result of the increase in cost of regular fuel.

Government sought to address this issue primarily by hiring a fuel inspector tasked with traveling Island roadways and conducting tests of fuel where and when they feel necessary. However, as with other professions like conservation officers, this individual has been assigned to COVID-19 enforcement efforts instead of their regular duties.

Hiring of provincial fuel inspector

Question to the Minister of Finance: Can you confirm that the individual hired as a provincial fuel inspector is now primarily assigned to COVID-19 enforcement efforts?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, hon. member.

I know, I can't confirm that. The COVID-19 is not something that's through my department. But as far as the marked fuel, we are working on the legislation and we will have officers – highway safety officers is what I'm understanding – that will be trained in dipping tanks. So if there is a concern in question, they have the ability to do that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, your second supplementary.

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Just a week ago, we heard Wade MacKinnon, PEI's manager of investigation and enforcement speaking on *Compass* about the increase in COVID-19 enforcement measures by conservation officers. He indicated that officers are now spending 70% of their time enforcing public health measures. A necessary job, but not the job conservation officers were initially hired to do. While he did not explicitly call for additional staff, he certainly indicated more help would not be refused.

Hiring for public health enforcement

Question to the Minister of Finance: Will your government consider hiring more individuals to conduct public health enforcement, freeing up provincial employees to do the jobs they were originally hired to do?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Ms. Compton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. member, through COVID, it's been all hands on deck. People have been redeployed from different departments. We want to ensure all employees that we're there for them. If we do need greater staff to incorporate and include the dipping of tanks to ensure that Islanders are complying to the rules, that's something we can look at.

Throughout COVID, we've deployed a number of new people to help with all the concerns that we have here in this province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

Mr. Henderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Like many Islanders, I was disappointed last week by the sudden decision to divert emergency surgeries away from the Prince County Hospital. In fact, the decision was so secret that even the minister himself was unaware of it. So, today I am glad to see that Health PEI is now being open about announcing further diversions, even if I do remain dismayed by the need to take this course of action.

Last Thursday, Health PEI was quite confident that the diversion process would end today. But, by the recent announcement, we know that the saga continues. Today, we even hear another health service to PEI in neurology has been discontinued where currently there is a two-year waitlist for Island patients.

Daily change in trend to health care services

Question to the minister of health: How confident are you that this trend of services changing daily will not be a consistent pattern going forward?

Mr. McNeilly: Good question.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I think, as everybody in this Legislature – everybody in this province knows, we are in a worldwide pandemic. It has been all hands on deck. Where has the focus been and has to have been – is with regard to keeping Islanders safe. We look at other areas – other jurisdictions – that some areas actually have had to put up tent hospitals. We have done extremely well here.

Do we have challenges? Yes, we do have challenges. The hon. member references the diversion of services from Prince County Hospital and yes – and I need to emphasize, too, though, that the diversion of those services for surgeries – it is for overnight emergency ones. It's not for previously scheduled ones through the day, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, I might remind the minister that it's his responsibility to look after the health care of Islanders – the Islanders that are requiring health services here.

Today, the talking head of Health PEI issued a memo which takes great offense to

questions raised in this Legislature and ensuing by the media coverage. I certainly hope that the minister has a talk with his talking head at Health PEI and explain to him that media coverage and the questions in this Legislature are both part of our democratic process.

In his memo, Dr. Gardam says he hopes to have this situation addressed by the summer, and I guess I define summer as it commences on June 21st.

Timeline for health care services at PCH

Question to the minister of health: Is this timeline the timeline that you'll provide for a solution, and will this uncertainty at Prince County Hospital extend beyond the summertime date of June 21st?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Well, first of all, Mr. Speaker, I recall back to Friday, I believe it was, when the member felt that health care was a matter of asking questions as if it was a game show. It's not a game show.

Now, for the second time in my recollection – there could have been previous ones – that the member refers to our very qualified – our very dedicated staff within health and wellness and within Health PEI as talking heads. Now, maybe I'm wrong, but to me, the use of that term is a very disrespectful one for our experts in Health PEI and in health and wellness.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Hudson: We have staff that are working with regard to the challenges that we have. With regard to general surgeries at Prince County Hospital, one of the things that I need to point out here today is that there has been an offer already made to a new surgeon to come to Prince County Hospital, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness, your second supplementary.

Mr. Henderson: That's great news, Mr. Speaker, that there is an offer being made.

Let's hope somebody signs it and let's start to see the results, because like I say, we don't want to be playing a game here. We don't want to be playing games with Islanders' health.

An Hon. Member: You're the one (Indistinct) –

Mr. Henderson: You're playing roulette with Islanders' health care that require this.

Dr. Gardam has also said that this type of surgical diversion is quite common; that it happens almost frequently in rural areas of Canada all the time.

Question to the minister of health: Have you consulted with other health departments across the country regarding this response and can you provide some examples of provinces that divert emergency surgeries from half of their provincial referral hospitals? Maybe there, you can get some solutions on how to remedy this situation.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm very happy to hear two comments in that preamble from the member: first of all, that it's not a game. It appeared last week that he felt it was a game. And then he changed from talking heads to giving the due recognition and the qualifications of our interim CEO at Health PEI as Dr. Gardam. I do appreciate that because they need respect – absolute respect.

With regard to looking at other jurisdictions, right across the board, we're making contact – our experts, our professionals, our recruiters are making contact with different jurisdictions right across the country in the attempt to stabilize services, but also in the attempt to make sure that we are continuously front and centre with regard to recruitment, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

Mr. McNeilly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's been 340 days since the historic Black Lives Matter march in Charlottetown on June 5th, 2020. This march saw close to 10,000 Islanders participate from all across Prince Edward Island and was led by leaders of the Black community.

On June 12th, a petition was tabled in this House on behalf of the Black Cultural Society of PEI and thousands of Islanders calling for a review of government policies and legislation, focusing on education, health care, wellbeing and job security. At the time, the Premier committed to the review, saying government needed to do better.

Racially-focused policy review

Question to the Premier: What has your government done over the last year to review policies and legislation with a racially-focused lens?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, it is something that we take very seriously and is something that has been ongoing since that time.

We have been working with members of the Black Cultural Society of PEI and others to make sure that we're doing this properly. We have given them resources to make sure that we know what they want and what we're able to deliver. It has been a great collaboration henceforth and I think we're on the right track with our planning.

When that is complete, I will be very happy to share it with all Islanders and members of this Legislature.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

Mr. McNeilly: I've previously spoken in this House about racism and how it impacts people, communities and our ability to grow together inclusively. Our Chief Public Health Officer has declared racism a public health issue.

While commitments have been made and an off-Island group was hired to conduct some consulting, there has been very little concrete action taken so far. The Department of Economic Growth, Tourism

and Culture and the department of education have each taken some steps but much more still needs to be done.

Anti-racism table

Question to the Premier: If you're serious about addressing racism in this province, why have you not approved the implementation of an anti-racism table that has been requested numerous times by the BIPOC community?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, I do think we're making progress but I would be quite honest and open with the hon. member that it's probably slower than what anyone would hope. In spite of that, I think we're making very positive steps.

We had a wonderful meeting with the Minister of Economic Growth, Tourism and Culture and I, with members of the BIPOC community and we've talked extensively about government facilitating them with resources, with money – whatever needs to be done for the initiatives to be led by members of that community as well.

I think we're making some significant progress, and as an example, I know the member and I have talked in the past about a memorial to The Bog. When we talked about that with Tamara Steele and others, what I said to them was I'm a white Christian heterosexual man, I should not be telling you what you should build but I will provide money to you. You tell me what the community wants to see and I will put the resources there to make sure the money is there to be what needs to be there.

I don't want to get into – I think it would be wrong for me to try to be directing what that should be. That's kind of the approach I have been trying to take with this group and others. I want results as well as the hon. member.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty, your second supplementary.

Mr. McNeilly: In the petition, there was a request, and it has been brought to your attention numerous times, about an anti-

racism table led by Black Islanders, led by people from the BIPOC community. That is too slow. It needs to be created. It sits somewhere within government, Mr. Premier. Please address this and this concern.

Since racism can be experienced in numerous aspects, we must ensure that there are positions in place to report – to address the issues that continue to exist on a daily basis. We need to do more.

Addressing issues of racism

Mr. Premier, will you commit to establishing an anti-racism secretariat and addressing issues of racism and streamlining our approach to racism across our province?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, I have great respect for the hon. member as a colleague in this Legislature. I count him as a friend as well, when we're not in here rattling sabers sometimes. I am very serious about this. I need to review thoroughly but I think this was the next recommendation coming from that consultant's report that we talked about.

I will pledge to the hon. member here today that I will talk to senior staff in my department to expedite that process as quickly as possible. I want people in PEI. I don't care about their race, colour, their sex, their gender, their religion; to me, they're Islanders. They're to be treated equally and until we're able to say that with confidence, we have failed. I will commit to the hon. member today to expediate that process as quickly as possible.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

Mr. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Earlier this session, I had discussed property taxes with the finance minister. Today, I do want to share an observation that was shared with me recently. The observation was that it seemed odd that you can buy cannabis online from government, but you cannot pay your property taxes online.

Electronic property tax payment

My question to the finance minister is: How come Islanders can buy cannabis online from government but cannot pay their property taxes electronically?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Ms. Compton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you for the question.

You can actually pay your property taxes online. You can set up a payment through your bank. You can do it three times a year, you can do it monthly – whatever you'd like to do. I think most people do make their property tax payments with their mortgage payment, but the option is there through your bank.

I know ITSS is currently working on a portal right now for my property tax to go on and be able to pay your taxes in a secure way and also to make some changes and updates. I know that ITSS is working on that right now.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

Mr. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That does sound good because, as we've learned, especially since the pandemic and a lot of things have become online – we have meetings virtually, Zoom, et cetera.

Speaking with COVID as well, we know that it has been tough on many Islanders in many aspects of their lives, of course, including finances.

Property tax payments in 2020

I know that your department did make some changes to make it more beneficial for Islanders during property tax season, but as we're starting to see our new property tax bills come forward now, my question to the same minister is: Where are we with last year's property tax payments?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you for the question.

As we all know, normally, all of your property taxes would be paid for the year by the end of November. That was extended until the end of December, but as of March 31st of this year, I believe 91% of Islanders have paid the property taxes and that compared to 2020 – it would have been 92%. So, we're within 1% of people in arrears as to previous COVID.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe, your second supplementary.

Mr. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I brought this issue before the House as well. In three separate conversations that I had yesterday included, in my district specifically, was house prices and the escalation of how quickly they've risen, how quickly they're selling, and for the prices that they are selling for.

Increase in property tax

My question going back to the same minister is: With these perceived, and in many cases, implemented higher prices for homes, will Islanders, when they receive their property tax bill, see a huge increase in their assessments and maybe thus seeing a bigger increase in their actual property taxes?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Ms. Compton: Thank you for the question, hon. member.

The increases to property taxes are tied to the Consumer Price Index, so there is a credit. I believe it's called the owner-occupied residential credit. So, anyone who is actually living in their house – the credit is tied to the Consumer Price Index and the Consumer Price Index for 2020 was 0%, so there will be no increases for those Islanders.

For anyone who does not qualify for the owner-occupied credit, they would be subject to increase in prices for houses and I believe it's been up to 10% for 2020, so we

know that there has been an increase but it does not affect – increase in property taxes would not be affected for Island occupied homes.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

Ms. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The original launch of the Women's Wellness Program in 2017 was for a community-based service that Islanders of all genders, orientations, and ages could access without referral wherever they were in PEI.

Now, the website states: Sexual Health After-Hours Walk-in Clinics, as well as visits in Souris, O'Leary and Alberton are cancelled until further notice. This means that services are only available in Summerside and Charlottetown.

Equitable access to women's health services

Question for the Minister of Health and Wellness: If women's and sexual health services are not available in rural PEI or out of hours, how is this government providing fair and equitable access to services for Islanders?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I think I have to go back to a couple of the points that were raised previously here this afternoon – that have services as a result of COVID been impacted, that have we had to divert certain personnel for a variety of reasons to ensure that Islanders overall during this pandemic – and certainly, as we move through the third wave of the pandemic, we see that Prince Edward Island has fared out extremely well. But, yes, it has created, certainly, some challenges within the health care system, as it has right across government.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere, final question.

Ms. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This is not a new problem and it's not a problem related to the pandemic. My colleagues have previously asked about the limited OB-GYN services available for Island women that have been ongoing for months, if not years. I've been hearing from Island women sharing their frustrations in getting timely gynecological health services.

One woman needs an immediate medical treatment that can only be provided by an OB-GYN but her doctor's request for referral has been denied. There is just no capacity for her to be taken on as a patient. Her request to be referred off-Island has also been denied. She has no other options.

Referrals for women's medical treatment

Question for the minister of health: If women's health is truly a priority for you and your department, why is it so difficult for women to get referrals for the medical treatment that they need?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

This is certainly something I do agree with the hon. member, with regard to the concerns that she has brought forward here, that there are some services that are absolutely essential, absolutely necessary and require follow up. I guess, certainly, we have to look across the whole spectrum.

With regard to this particular case, I would be more than happy to have a conversation with the member subsequent to Question Period here and to look into it further on behalf of her constituent.

Thank you.

Speaker: End of Question Period.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

End of Question Period