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—
Chair

Mr. Rob Merrifield

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, CPC)): I want to welcome everybody to the second meeting of this session of the health committee.

There has been a little bit of a change. Last week we talked about having the department here to discuss fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. They are coming, but they need a little more time.

So I want to talk about future business, but before that, we have a notice of a motion that was given at the last meeting by Madam Gagnon. We would ask her to submit this motion or speak to this motion if she would like—propose it and then move it.

Madam Gagnon, would you be interested in proposing your motion?

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Whereas the federal government announced on November 18, 2005, that a Memorandum of Understanding had been signed with the legal representatives of individuals infected by the hepatitis C virus through the blood system before 1986 and after July 1, 1990; it is moved that the Standing Committee on Health call the health minister to appear in order to apprise members of the committee and the Canadian public of the state of negotiations regarding this Memorandum of Understanding.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We have a motion on the floor. Is there debate on the motion?

Madam Brown.

Ms. Bonnie Brown (Oakville, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, I'm totally in favour of this motion. I think we do need an update on this matter. However, as you so wisely pointed out at the first meeting, there are several other matters of business that the committee has dealt with in the past that are not resolved. I wonder if the mover of the motion might agree to add words at the end that say "and other matters". Because by the time the minister comes here we may have had updates on some of those other matters and have some things to say to him about them, as well.

The Chair: Just as further information on the motion, I believed in talking with the minister's office that it was scheduled for June 6 or June 8, and perhaps the estimates may be part of that as well, which would open it wide up.

Does the mover see this as a friendly amendment?

Is this an amendment that you want, Madam Brown?

Ms. Bonnie Brown: I think it sounds fairly vague—"and other matters"—but it gives us the flexibility to decide what we would include in that meeting. Obviously, Madam Gagnon will have a series of questions about the hepatitis C memorandum of agreement. I can think of some others right off the top—for example, the reproductive technology regulations. But before I waste the minister's time by asking him to give us an update, I would like to hear from officials on some of those other matters so that when the minister comes we can be succinct.

The Chair: Madam Gagnon.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Mr. Chair, is it my turn to speak?

[English]

The Chair: No, I just asked if this was a friendly amendment or not.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: I know that the minister will be appearing before the committee on June 8, but as you know, the session will almost be over by then. I believe that this is a priority file that warrants the minister's particular attention. I would therefore hope he would be available before June 8 so that we are able to give the victims a proper answer.

This is a very tough time for the victims. The summer adjournment is approaching and time is of the essence for many of them. If we raise this issue with the minister at the same time as we are discussing a whole range of other issues, when we don't have a lot of time on our hands... I would really like to have an update as to how far along the minister is with the Memorandum of Understanding.

The victims are very worried. They've been calling me and saying that a lot of money is being spent on negotiations, but that the government didn't include anything in its budget that we can get consensus on.

•(1110)

[English]

The Chair: If I'm interpreting correctly, there is an amendment that suggests there are other matters. You're suggesting that you don't want other matters and you would prefer to have the minister here as soon as possible. That's the intent of your motion.

Is that right?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: I'd like that to be one of the committee's priorities. Victims were very disappointed that it wasn't in the budget. The government hasn't shown it intends...

[*English*]

The Chair: We realize all that.

We're opening the debate.

Mr. Fletcher.

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia, CPC): I'd like to support Ms. Brown's motion for a number of reasons.

Perhaps I'll just mention to Ms. Gagnon that I appreciate you're raising this. The hepatitis C issue is very important. The Conservative Party has been leading the charge for the last decade to increase the compensation, and we certainly appreciate the support of the Bloc and the NDP in that effort.

In the last session, on October 28, this committee called for compensation as per the Krever inquiry. That was followed up by a March 21 motion at the committee, and then on April 21 a concurrence motion in the House passed, and your party and the NDP supported the Conservatives on that.

The fight has certainly gone as far back as Dr. Grant Hill's time on the Hill and Rob Merrifield's lead as health critic in the previous parliamentary session. The reason I've raised this is to again empathize with the victims that it has been a very long time in coming and that they do deserve compensation.

The reason I support the motion is because I want to assure the members that the government is committed to fulfilling our campaign promise. The minister and the Government of Canada fully intend to proceed with the commitment to provide compensation to those infected with hepatitis C through tainted blood.

Discussions are taking place with counsel representing those infected before January 1, 1986, and after July 1, 1990, those who were left out and those who were left out of the 1990 settlement. A lot of work is taking place at this time to make progress on a compensation arrangement. Both parties are currently negotiating, and the substance of the discussions should remain between them because they're at the negotiating table.

I hope the members of the committee understand that as this is proceeding the health minister would be able to reiterate to the committee his commitment to bring this to a resolution as soon as possible, but he wouldn't be able to say much more than the fact that there are negotiations ongoing. The Minister of Health has agreed to appear before the committee in early June, and he will be able to speak on this issue in more detail.

Certainly if there is anything that comes up, I'd be happy to keep the committee up to date on the process.

I recommend supporting Ms. Brown's motion because it frees the committee to ask the minister other questions when he does arrive.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fletcher.

Madam Chamberlain.

Hon. Brenda Chamberlain (Guelph, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and congratulations on your appointment. I'm pleased to have you there, because you know a lot about health issues.

First of all, let me say that I think it's too long to wait for the minister until June 8. As Madam Gagnon has pointed out, we may be adjourning, and for a long time I think this has been a number-one issue for Canadians.

We have not talked about wait times here. I would like to bring that up. As you well know, we have been wrestling with that. The parliamentary secretary has indicated the government wants to fulfill some of these promises. Well, you're the government, and now I would like them fulfilled. I will be in full support of that, and I would like to see that charge ahead.

I think the minister needs to come earlier. I also think that if he comes on the eighth, we will probably need to book him right after that for another date, because I don't think the eighth is going to be enough time for what we need to discuss when we talk about other issues. I think we need more time with the minister.

I'd request that you think about that and ask him to put aside maybe two dates for us. With it being the number-one health issue, we would then want him to pay that due respect.

I would respectfully request that you do that, Mr. Chairman.

●(1115)

The Chair: Sure.

I think I hear the tone of what we're saying is that we want the one date for the hepatitis C because of the issue, and a further date—which I believe will be perhaps on the estimates, which is wide open to any issue—that would address Madam Brown's concern as well.

Mr. Batters.

Mr. Dave Batters (Palliser, CPC): Yes, Mr. Chair.

I certainly support the motion from Madam Gagnon. I think this issue has dragged on far too long, and this is something the government fully intends to take action on. We need to report to this committee and let members of this committee know where things stand. While I support that, I would say that I agree with the parliamentary secretary, in that it could be a relatively short answer, and that the matter may be dealt with in five or ten minutes as to exactly where things stand.

You may be satisfied with the answer from the minister, and then it would be nice to have the amendment as proposed by Ms. Brown. I would say adding "as well as other topics". "Other matters" may confuse the issue and the minister may read that as other matters related to hepatitis C, for example, so "other topics". Certainly the idea of having the minister for two meetings, while I can't speak for the minister, I think would be a good idea. We can get all these issues out. It would be good to include the "as well as other topics"; we'll start with hepatitis C, but it may be a short, succinct, ten-minute session, and then we can get on to some other business.

Regarding the minister's schedule and how quickly he is able to appear before committee, it's my understanding from talking to him that he is travelling extensively this month as Minister of Health, and that is literally the first day he is able to come, June 6 or June 8. That's all the insight I can provide on that.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Just as a clarification to try to get some kind of direction here, as I understand the mover of the motion, the intent is to talk about hepatitis C, and to have a fulsome debate on that with the minister. If there is time left over, I think the rest of the committee is saying why waste the minister's time and ours, and we could move on to other issues.

Is that acceptable to you, Madam Gagnon?

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: It is, on the condition that we really have time to broach the topic and that a discussion on it be a priority. I don't want...

[English]

The Chair: We'll deal with the issue first.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Mr. Chair, I understand that a lot of statements were made before the election. Now that the election is over, the government needs to show it's willing to make this issue a priority and move on it as quickly as possible, but there was no reference to this in the budget. And yet, the government outlined in the budget how it intends to move into several areas of provincial jurisdiction, for example medical training, to name but one. The government didn't give us any figures on this, however. The government could have told us in the budget that the hepatitis C matter would be resolved.

So, I would like to get an update here, in committee. However, June 8 is in my opinion, far too late to do so. There may only be a couple of weeks left at that point in the parliamentary session. This will be followed by the summer adjournment. So that means that should the victims wish to lobby the government between now and summer to take action, they'll be faced with a *fait accompli* because Parliament will no longer be sitting. That's why I want this issue to be dealt with urgently.

[English]

The Chair: Fair enough, I understand.

Madam Priddy.

Ms. Penny Priddy (Surrey North, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for letting me join you a few minutes late.

I think having the minister come is an excellent idea. I think there are all kinds of things we would be delighted to talk with him about. But I think, as it relates to hepatitis C, that is far too late. I would personally hope that issue would have been resolved long before June 8. It would be my personal hope and maybe expectation, I don't know. I think that for those people with hepatitis C outside the window, they have heard the government say that they would be compensated immediately; Parliament passed a motion to that effect. I have not heard back from the minister.

The minister said, when I asked him in the House, it's a high priority for us. So if it's a high priority, is it going to be a high priority before June 8? I cannot go back to those people who call me who have lost their homes, lost their jobs, and who are losing their families and say we've asked him to appear before us in six weeks. I can't do that. For that particular discussion, I'm sorry, I think it either has to be immediate or the government has to make their announcement.

● (1120)

The Chair: I think it would be less than a month before he'd be here. One of those weeks is the break week, and another week I believe he's travelling internationally, so those are the constraints we're in. I don't think there's any desire by the minister to delay the action. That's certainly every indication that I've seen. I know the committee wants to have him here, and I think it's appropriate for him to answer for himself on those issues.

Madam Demers.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Mr. Chair, what I find very funny, even ironic, is that we're here now debating the urgency of the hepatitis C file, when we know the parliamentary secretary already advocated so strongly on behalf of the victims last year. He fought hard, sometimes in desperation, for those who were infected. So I think that he's able to understand why it is so important for us to meet with the minister and get answers quickly from the foundation managing the funds, from everybody involved in the file so that the victims are at last acknowledged and receive what they are entitled to before they die.

This is exactly what the parliamentary secretary said last year. These people need to get the money quickly; every day, some of them die. Let's remember that. I'm not doubting the government's good faith, but we need to do more and do it more quickly.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Fletcher.

Mr. Steven Fletcher: Everything Ms. Demers has said is pretty accurate.

I'd like to clarify something just for the record. The government's commitment was to compensate the victims. The motion last year did say to compensate them immediately, but that was when the government of the day had ten years to deal with the issue. We've only been in office for not even 100 days, but I would humbly suggest that we are making a lot more progress in those 100 days than the previous government did in ten years. I completely empathize with the victims, and I know the government does. They shouldn't even be in this situation in the first place, but here we are. We're working on it, and we'll solve it.

The Chair: We've had debate on the motion. Everybody has heard the motion. The amendment on the motion is to—you're right—you've put the amendment forward.

The mover has not seen the amendment as a friendly amendment, or have you? That is, to deal with hepatitis C, and if there's time left over, to deal with other issues. That's the amendment.

Madam Gagnon, I need an answer. Is that a friendly amendment or not?

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Ideally, I would have preferred we vote on my motion and see if it passed.

[English]

The Chair: It's your call. We'll vote on the amendment if it's not a friendly one. If it is a friendly one we'll vote on it complete. That's the direction I need as a chair.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: If the discussion moves to other topics, the minister may not have time to prepare. In that case, we could put it off until June 8. That's why I wanted to focus solely on this issue. It would be far easier for the minister to come to the committee and deal with one single matter.

I have nothing against adding other subjects, as we may exhaust the issue after the 30 or 45 minutes. However, that would mean waiting for the minister until June 8. So, that's what explains my rush to get him here.

• (1125)

[English]

The Chair: I understand what you're saying.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Anyway, June 8—

[English]

The Chair: You see it as not a friendly amendment.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Hold on, Mr. Chair. If I agree to the amendment, the minister will come before the committee on June 8. Anyway, he'll come on that date, that's what is scheduled. But nobody can stop me talking about the tainted blood issue. That is why we haven't solved anything. Out of kindness, I could have agreed, but I think that won't solve anything.

We will debate the motion. I'd like the minister to become before this committee next week or the week after we get back. What we ideally would have liked is that the minister, who knows full well this is an issue, would already have put this in his agenda and decided to come and inform the committee.

[English]

The Chair: If this motion passes, we'll make the request to the minister; it's the minister's prerogative as to when he can clear his schedule to come. We haven't got control of that as a committee, but I see you're not accepting it, so let's vote on the amendment.

The amendment is to add other items to it. Discussion on the amendment? Seeing none...

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: No, I said the exact opposite, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Oh, you accept it?

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: No. I said that agreeing to the amendment would be tantamount to saying the minister would come before the committee on June 8. The minister would not bring forward his visit.

[English]

The Chair: I understand what you're saying.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: So, that wouldn't achieve anything. At any rate, he'll come before the committee on June 8. So, let's vote on my motion. Whatever happens, we'll talk about hepatitis C and all the other issues on June 8. This won't make the minister come and meet us any earlier.

I thought I'd suggest we only deal with this issue so that—

[English]

The Chair: I understand.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: —it would be less trouble for the minister and a prod to take quick action.

[English]

The Chair: I believe the committee understands your position.

We're now voting on an amendment to that position put forward by Madam Brown.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: Now we will vote on the amended motion.

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: So that's the direction on hepatitis C. We'll get that invitation to the minister as soon as possible.

Now we'd like to move to the rest of the meeting, which is the long-term agenda of the committee. In doing so, we'll perhaps be getting into some issues that are before the court. We don't have to, but my recommendation to the committee is to move in camera so we can have free flow of debate without compromising any court position. Whether that would happen or not, I don't know, but I think it would be a wise thing for the committee to do.

Do we have consensus that we move in camera?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: That is agreed.

Let's have a break, and then we'll move in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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