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Tuesday, November 28, 2006

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Chair

Mr. Rob Merrifield

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•(1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

I want to thank everybody for coming. We've got a very interesting session ahead—I hope. We'll be able to get into an in camera session with regard to the report on childhood obesity that I hope we'll be able to table sometime between now and Christmas. We want to give ourselves as much time as we can for that, but we first have a couple of motions, one being the motion Madame Demers has brought forward on silicone breast implants.

This is the motion we have before us. It was circulated and reads:

That the Standing Committee on Health request that the Minister of Health produce an estimate of the costs associated with the production of the documents requested in the motion adopted by the Committee on October 31, 2006.

With regard to that motion, on October 31, 2006, we were to present a report to the House and to do that tomorrow, but I've asked Madame Demers if she would want this information prior to the report being presented to the House, so that we have all the information ahead of time. So if there are no objections to that, we'll just leave the presentation of the report to the House until this motion is complied with.

Is that fair? Then we can discern whether to present it or not.

We will go right to this motion.

Madame Demers, do you want to introduce the motion and speak to it?

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As a responsible citizen, I certainly had a lot to think about when I heard that the astronomical sum of \$53.6 million had been spent to produce the documents that I had requested from Health Canada. These documents on which officials had based their decision regarding breast implants totalled 65,000 pages. I told myself that it was absolutely essential for us to get an estimate of the cost, because in my opinion, these numbers are very high.

Meanwhile, as I mentioned last week to the Minister of Health, I contacted several companies to ask them what it would cost to have the documents translated. The highest quote I received was \$6.5 million. Furthermore, that was discounting the fact that with such a voluminous document, I probably would have received a substantial break on the price because this was not an ordinary translation request. Therefore, when I discovered that the document could have

been translated for this amount, I felt sure that the breakdown contained other costs.

I'd like to get an exact cost breakdown. You can't fool the members of the Bloc Québécois. We are responsible individuals and we want to know what the figures are in order to make a decision, further to the government's presentation.

•(1540)

[English]

The Chair: We talked about this casually, and I would certainly concur that this is a fair motion, in the sense that I think all of the committee were taken aback by the numbers that were presented. So that was a fair comment.

Go ahead, Madame Gagnon.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): I'd like this to be a lesson to us.

My comment is directed to Mr. Fletcher, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health. As he well knows, sitting on the government side is not the same as serving in opposition. I think we're capable of making that distinction, but at the same time, taking figures that are...

I think this should serve as a lesson for us for the next time, in case we're presented again with figures that appear to have been plucked out of nowhere. I can appreciate the parliamentary secretary, a member of the government, wanting to defend his minister, but at the same time, his statements need to be consistent.

We made a decision based on these numbers, otherwise, we might have looked at other options. This is not a subject that inspires partisanship, but rather one that warrants serious consideration.

We could have made this request, had there been some openness as to the figures supplied to us by Health Canada. We could have objected that \$56 million was an insane amount and we could have re-evaluated the decision.

Let this be a lesson to us. If we're called upon to deal with a similar matter in the future, committee members should set aside any partisanship and endeavour at all costs to respect the will of Health Canada. Although responsibility rests with the minister, we were not attacking him. We simply wanted the matter to be seriously considered.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Okay, so you're supporting the motion.

Any other discussion on the motion?

Mr. Fletcher.

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia, CPC): In regard to the comments of the honourable member, the fact is we supported the motion because we want it to be non-partisan and allow the member, Nicole Demers, to have the opportunity to have some confidence in the result.

I think it's fair to say that the sum of \$56 million was not expected at all, and even if it was—what did you say, \$5.5 million?—or \$600,000, it still seems like a lot of money, especially when it's been reviewed by experts. But let me just share some facts about the cost of translation. I think all of the committee members would be very interested in them.

The estimate, as we all know, is \$55.9 million to meet the request and the motion of October 31, 2006. As stated by the minister last week, the department is seeking means to comply with the motion adopted on October 31 and appeared in front of the committee on November 21 to answer questions.

The department has identified the studies and research that it considered in reaching its decision to grant medical device licences. In addition to the 65,000 pages of information provided by the manufacturers, Health Canada reviewed the existing scientific literature on the issue of breast implant safety, effectiveness, and effects on health.

This is the interesting part. The cost of translating the technical information is considerably more than for regular documents. Most translation services provide an estimate of 40¢ per word at a rate of four pages per day for technical information. This rate is applicable for the translation of the manufacturer's material, which averages about 500 words per page. The cost to produce a translation of the medical device applications alone would be more than \$13 million.

The translation of scientific articles is more difficult again. The text is small and it often requires a technical expert in the area, as well as an experienced translator. To obtain an estimate for these articles, Health Canada sent a recent six-page publication to two services used frequently by the Medical Devices Bureau. The lower quote of \$3,000 compared with \$3,600 was used to calculate the translation costs and time estimates.

The scientific articles are copyrighted material. Thus, prior to the translation, they would need to be purchased and permission would have to be granted to use the translated version of the work. The cost of translating the scientific literature on silicone breast implants depends on which years the committee wishes to consider. Health Canada has reviewed the literature from 1950 onwards electronically, but has considered in detail the literature published after 1960. The cost to obtain and translate these documents would range upwards of \$42 million.

In addition, not considered explicitly in the above estimate is the time involved in meeting the committee's request and any operational impact it would have on the Medical Devices Bureau, and so on, to review these documents and translate them accurately. I

think this offers a more detailed explanation. We can move forward with the motion if Madame Demers wishes, but I think you get the gist.

Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: We have a motion. Do you want to speak to the motion, Ms. Dhalla?

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.): I have a question for the parliamentary secretary. Perhaps he could enlighten us and provide us with an answer. In terms of the translation costs for some of the scientific literature and other research materials you mentioned that have been forwarded to Health Canada for consideration, is the government accepting documents in one language from manufacturers and not accepting them in both languages?

Mr. Steven Fletcher: There may be lots of research done in French, and I'm sure people who are fluent in French are reviewing those documents. Some may be in another language, but are you suggesting then, Ms. Dhalla, that all scientific papers and so on for review should be translated before they're brought forward? If you are, please say so.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla: I'm not suggesting anything, actually. I was just asking a simple question. When documents are submitted to Health Canada, are they done in both official languages? Or to manufacturers and other individuals submitting reports for this type of study, can they just be submitted in one language, either French or English?

Mr. Steven Fletcher: I would assume that they have to be submitted in at least one official language.

The Chair: We'll ask Nancy.

Mrs. Nancy Miller Chenier (Committee Researcher): I assume they have a policy that it's the language of choice of the manufacturer, either language, but I don't know that for sure.

The Chair: Okay.

What we can do is we can go around the table more if we want, but we have a motion on the floor that's asking for a detailed breakdown. We certainly can get that. Why don't we pass this thing and then we can take it from there?

Ms. Fry.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Just as a matter of information, I would really like the parliamentary secretary to bring back that answer to us. Does Health Canada demand that any information it receives is given to it in two languages? It's just a question.

The Chair: Yes, that's fair enough. It will probably come out in this one as well.

Mr. Steven Fletcher: I'll find out for you. It's no problem.

The Chair: It's a good question.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go in camera.

It will take a minute or two. I hate to say this to a study on obesity, but don't go for the cookies, go for a coffee.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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