



North

Yellowknife family calls for changes to medical travel policy after troubling experience

Health minister says territory is working to 'modernize' program

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Linda Mercer England, right, with her daughter-in-law Goldie Mercer. Mercer England and her family are calling on the N.W.T. government to change its medical travel policy to pay for escorts during medical evacuations, for adults. (Elliot Pope/CBC)

A Yellowknife family's troubled experience with medical travel has them calling for the N.W.T. government to make policy changes.

Linda Mercer England began having kidney stone troubles last October. She said she was in pain for weeks and knew what it was, having experienced kidney stones before. This time, she said, doctors at Stanton Territorial Hospital prescribed her some medication and sent her home.

That resulted in a week of "excruciating pain," she said. Mercer England said she went back to the hospital, only to be prescribed more medication. She was meant to wait two weeks until a specialist was in town.

But that wouldn't be soon enough.

"My husband, he was observing me," Mercer England said. "He insisted that I go back to the hospital."

So, she returned again, this time to be medevaced to Edmonton. It's a journey she can't quite remember.

"They had me put to sleep," Mercer England said. "I didn't know I was by myself then."

She said the situation was scary and it wasn't clear if she'd live or die.

Despite asking, the N.W.T. government denied Mercer England's family's request to pay for her husband to go with her, citing its own medical travel policy, which says patients needing emergency air transport to another facility do not qualify for escort benefits.

"My husband was told that he could make decisions from Yellowknife, that I didn't need him there," Mercer England said. "If they could see the pictures that were taken of me in the ICU, I don't think they'd want their family members there without them being there."



Linda Mercer England believes she could have died while being medevaced to the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton for kidney stones. She and her family are calling for changes to the N.W.T.'s medical travel policy. (Submitted by Linda Mercer England)

In emails Mercer England shared with CBC News, N.W.T. Health Minister Lesa Semmler explained the government's reasoning to Range Lake MLA Kieron Testart, who Mercer England's family had contacted about their situation.

"We do acknowledge that the support of family, when critically ill, does benefit patients, however compassionate care is not an eligibility under the medical travel policy," Semmler wrote.

Another email from Semmler to Testart states the medical travel office denied her request for an escort "because patients requiring emergency air transport to another facility for care are not eligible for escort benefits."

Mercer England would end up having her husband by her side in Edmonton for the more than two weeks she was there, but it was paid out of pocket, running up a bill of nearly \$6,000, she says.



Linda Mercer England, right, with her husband James England. Mercer England credits her husband with saving her life and says he had a right to be by her side in her moment of need. (Devon Tredinnick/CBC)

Despite the months that have passed, Mercer England says she still hasn't recovered enough to return to work. Her experience has left her with other lasting effects, she says.

"I got PTSD, I got anxiety. I don't sleep through the nights. I've got to make sure that I'm in touch with my husband in the night to reassure me that he is there," Mercer England said.

'Completely unacceptable,' MLA says

Testart has since raised the issue in the Legislative Assembly this session. He said he's heard of cases like this before.

"The trauma of being deprived of a loved one's side when they're in some of the most scariest and vulnerable moments of their lives is just completely unacceptable," he said.

The government still needs to pass its next budget for the upcoming fiscal year. Without a change to the medical travel policy, however, Testart says it won't be getting his support.

He wants an exemption policy so the health minister can intervene in cases that fall outside the medical travel policy.

"These individual circumstances are so serious and fall outside the policy that they need to be addressed with an exemption," Testart said. "This isn't rocket science."

Minister working to 'modernize' medical travel program

CBC News contacted the territory's health authority about Mercer England's experience but did not receive a response by deadline.

However, in an earlier prepared statement, the minister said work to revise the medical travel program is underway.

"We are doing significant work over the next several years to modernize the medical travel program. The goal is to make the program easier to use and to improve cultural safety for patients and families," Semmler said.

"Any future changes or added supports must consider the [N.W.T. government's] overall financial situation to make sure the program is sustainable."

Semmler's statement also says that, during a medical evacuation flight, on-board paramedics are responsible for the patient. She said air ambulances have limited space, and paramedics on board must be free to work quickly and unobstructed.

"For these reasons, and for safety, non-medical escorts including family members cannot travel on an air ambulance," Semmler said in the statement. "This is standard across the territories and most jurisdictions in Canada."

She also acknowledged it's hard for families when a loved one requires an emergency medical evacuation. "In those moments, people want to be close to the person they

care about.”

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