



By Don Horne

THE ISOTOPE SHORTAGE THAT NEVER WAS

Before December of last year, not many Canadians could locate Chalk River on the map, let alone know that there was a nuclear reactor producing medical isotopes.

Fewer still were aware that the Chalk River reactor was shut down, not producing the vital isotopes and creating a dire shortage of this much-needed medical tool.

But after the federal government intervened overruling the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission's objections to running the reactor without two cooling pumps to help provide additional emergency back-up power in the event of an earthquake, we soon learned that Chalk River was the primary supplier of medical isotopes to the world.

The fallout from the restart of the reactor were accusations from the Prime Minister of incompetence within Atomic Energy of Canada Limited (AECL). The president of the CNSC Linda Keen was removed, but not after she returned fire, stating that parliament had overreacted to the shutdown and overstepped their jurisdiction.

According to the previously silent Ottawa-based supplier MDS Nordion, Ottawa did overreact.

When the restart was ordered on December 16, only one pump was connected to the emergency supply. Now both pumps are operating with all the safety requirements in place.

All is well that ends well. Or so you would think.

A recent article in the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ) states that the entire crisis could have been avoided if MDS Nordion had participated in international efforts to boost global production of medical isotopes.

MDS Nordion provides half the world's medical isotopes produced at the Chalk River reactor.

In fact, the article goes so far as to say that MDS Nordion wouldn't co-operate with the next two largest isotope suppliers based in Europe – the Institut National des Radioelements (Belgium) and the Nuclear Research and Consultancy Group (Netherlands).

The two European companies co-ordinate their production schedules to ensure that one reactor is always running (as well as ensuring that their other supplier, Nuclear Technology Products in South Africa, is up and running).

According to a representative of the Dutch group, Ottawa's MDS Nordion – the big boy on the block for isotope production – keeps its cards close to the vest.

The Europeans complain that MDS Nordion is too tight-lipped on their production, and say that at the meetings either AECL tells the Nordion representative to remain silent on production, or they choose to keep quiet themselves.

A spokesman for AECL says that it isn't up to them "to comment on the global marketplace for isotopes", adding that their obligations are to MDS Nordion, and "are not in the supply chain part of the business."

As to the CMAJ article, MDS Nordion told the journal to refer to an email message that said it was "focused and committed to providing medical isotopes to the medical community".

After the article was published, the CMAJ posted a formal response from MDS Nordion, in which they rejected the allegations made by the Journal, calling them "untrue".

A spokeswoman for MDS Nordion stated that the company began to immediately co-ordinate a backup supply of isotopes, initiating a "communication with our competitors/backup suppliers in an attempt to mitigate the unplanned shortage by obtaining backup supply and placing orders for all available material" back on November 23.

The spokeswoman added that all back-up received by MDS Nordion came from South Africa, and despite requests to other suppliers (in Belgium and the Netherlands), they were unable to obtain any back supply before the federal government passed Bill C-38, reactivating the reactor at Chalk River.

Naturally, all of this information would have drastically changed the CMAJ article – if MDS Nordion had gone on the

record with the journal initially and not simply pointed to their email message.

Further, MDS Nordion says they had informed officials from the Department of Natural Resources back on November 22, stating that "this is a crisis situation". And that there would be "a global supply issue that was going to impact nuclear medicine and physicians around the world".

The Natural Resources Minister and the Health Minister each state that they knew nothing of this until December 5.

And the CMAJ stands behind the article.

Amid all of the accusations, denials and backpedaling, there remains one fact – the nuclear watchdog is out of a job, and she didn't deserve her fate.

And for those who choose not to believe the post factum statements issued by MDS Nordion on the entire affair, a more sinister inference could be drawn.

If MDS Nordion had informed their European counterparts to ramp up production back in October (which MDS Nordion says was impossible, as the Chalk River shutdown was a precipitous event), the medical isotope shortage could have been avoided altogether.

A policy analyst for the Nuclear Control Institute in the United States told the CMAJ that there is plenty of surplus capacity among isotope suppliers.

However, having the competition soak up that market while MDS Nordion waited for Chalk River to go back on line would have hurt.

Limiting supply to increase demand and boost prices is nothing new in the marketplace (ask any parent who was searching in vain for a Wii or PlayStation before Christmas). But the shortage of medical – MEDICAL – isotopes worldwide affected people suffering from cancer in search of treatment; and that is intolerable.

Perhaps it is time for the federal government to reinvigorate the nuclear watchdog with wider powers, so that vital information like this doesn't remain under wraps.

don@electricityforum.com