

Oral Questions

Why did the Minister not recommend to the public to stop eating mussels on Friday? Why not on Saturday, on Sunday, on Monday? Why did he wait until Tuesday before alerting the public? How many Canadian men and women were hospitalized because of the Minister's negligence?

● (1420)

[English]

Hon. Jake Epp (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, I gave the details to the House and to the country in very specific form yesterday. Those details were accurate yesterday. Those details are accurate today.

I said yesterday in the House that on Sunday, November 30, I had not been informed when the Department, with its experience, with its scientific knowledge, still did not have a health link but had what they referred to as "reason to believe" and they stopped the shipments. The laboratory tests continued.

I think the right hon. gentleman should accept that toxicologists and scientists have a responsibility to develop a knowledge base, based on their experience and their scientific abilities.

On Tuesday, when the evidence was clear to them, they came, very clearly, to me and recommended a medical alert, and I said: "Give me a medical alert and I will put it forward immediately", which I did.

I know the right hon. gentleman wants to stay with facts. His Members, again yesterday, said that I had known, and they gave the date of November 25. That is simply not true.

[Translation]

QUERY WHY POPULATION NOT NOTIFIED AT SAME TIME AS PRODUCERS

Right Hon. John N. Turner (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, I have just related the facts as the Minister himself explained them yesterday. Public health must always have priority. Mussels producers were made aware of the problem Sunday morning, November 29, but no warning was issued to the Canadian public before Tuesday evening, December 1. Two and a half days went by between the times when producers and the Canadian public were told about the toxic mussel problem. Why? Does the Minister not realize that hundreds of thousands of mussels were on sale during those two and a half days? Why did he not immediately warn Canadians about the danger, at the same time as the producers?

[English]

Hon. Jake Epp (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, I have said in the House, both on this issue and on other issues, that I will always err on the side of safety and health. I have done so.

Additionally, I say to the right hon. gentleman that I think he should understand that the scientists have a responsibility to

give me scientific facts. I have not questioned that. I have not tried to change that. I have not tried to influence that. I have spoken to nobody in the industry. Every time that a fact was given to me appropriate action was taken.

I say to him that surely he has to understand, as do Canadians, that some time is needed to establish a health link, whether it would be shellfish poisoning or a toxin other than the traditional ones with which the Department was familiar.

NATURE OF AVAILABLE EVIDENCE

Right Hon. John N. Turner (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, during the period in question, hundreds of thousands of mussels were sold to the Canadian public. We are not talking here about food which looks bad or about food which smells bad. We are talking about food that was poisonous.

My question is quite simple. If the evidence was sufficient to tell the producers to stop shipping, why was that evidence not sufficient to warn the Canadian public? That is a very simple question.

I want to ask the Minister: in view of this negligence on the part of his Department, and on the part of the Minister, why doesn't he seriously consider resigning that portfolio?

Some Hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Jake Epp (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, the Department was not negligent. My scientists were not negligent. The doctors were not negligent. The toxicologists were not negligent. Any information that I received—that's why the medical alert came forward on the Tuesday, as he is aware, and I was not negligent.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Epp (Provencher): I would like him to understand very clearly that on Sunday, where there was not a clear medical link established for a health alert, as a precautionary measure the Department put forward the "reason to believe" and stopped shipment. Surely any reasonable, fair-minded person would understand that and then expect scientists to put the information forward.

MINISTER'S POSITION

Ms. Sheila Copps (Hamilton East): Mr. Speaker, quite surely the caution should have been to tell Canadians to stop eating the mussels, not to tell shippers to stop shipping them.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Copps: This afternoon we hear another contradiction. The Minister now says that he learned about it on Sunday, November 30. Of course Sunday was not November 30, and I would like to ask the Minister how can he deny a telex from his own Department in which his Department had first notified of an illness on November 25, 1987? Quite clearly, if the