

Oral Questions

the stakes are the health and lives of Canadians, and his role on this matter is most important.

The Minister will recall that the department was informed as early as the 25th . . . And on the 27th, clinical tests started showing animals were dying. But the Minister only decided to act and inform the Canadian public on the evening of the 29th.

Can the Minister explain why it took him that long to inform the public about toxic mussels that could cause serious illness, and does the Minister not believe that he failed in his duty as a Minister to protect public health in waiting that long before telling the public?

[English]

Hon. Jake Epp (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, what the Hon. Member said is not correct. I was not informed on the 25th. That is absolutely incorrect, and I want to repeat it. I was not informed on the 25th.

● (1440)

I would like to explain again to the Hon. Member and to the House what happened. Regarding the linkage between the illnesses in some Montreal hospitals and what the cause might be, information was given to the Health Protection Branch and the linkage had to be established. Officials were working through those details. Keep in mind that my officials and others say that it was a new toxin and a new illness.

Even without having the formal links on which the Department generally works in removing a product from the market, because there was reason to believe, without the scientific link, the shipments from the two suppliers were pulled on the Sunday. That is the fact. On Monday and Tuesday officials worked further on lab linkages and I gave the details Tuesday night. For the Hon. Member to say that I knew about this on the 25th is simply not true.

[Translation]

QUERY WHY MINISTER DID NOT ALERT PUBLIC PROMPTLY THROUGH COMMUNIQUE

Mr. Jean-Claude Malépart (Montreal—Sainte-Marie): Mr. Speaker, the thirty people who are now ill in hospital are surely not satisfied with the Minister's reply that shipments of mussels have been stopped in Canada. Why did the Minister of Health and Welfare not rise to the defence of consumers and immediately publish a release, not four days after the notice, to advise shoppers in grocery stores, people in restaurants and at home that eating mussels was dangerous for their health? Why did the Minister fail to inform people for their own protection? Does he not feel that his failure and his incompetence force him to resign since people have lost all confidence in him?

[English]

Hon. Jake Epp (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, obviously I cannot put out a health warning until

we at least have some evidence of the reason for the warning. Even before we had the scientific linkage, shipments were stopped.

I am not trying to hide behind anyone, but I am dealing very directly with the manner in which we handle these health issues. Let me remind the Hon. Member that on Tuesday, within the hour after receiving the information, I gave the CBC crew that was waiting, the information. I can say—

Ms. Copps: That's why you brought it up.

Mr. Epp (Provencher): No, I did not. On the news of that evening, Dr. Hoey of the Montreal Urban Community, not a member of my staff, said the following:

I am actually astounded that we were able to move this quickly especially as we were dealing with a disease which to our knowledge has never before been described.

I simply say that even before the health alert came out on Tuesday night, the shipments had already been withdrawn without even having the full health linkage.

I would say to the Hon. Member that he may do what he wants in terms of partisan actions, but do not frighten Canadians, and stay with the truth.

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TRADE

CANADA-UNITED STATES TRADE AGREEMENT—COMPLETION OF FINAL TEXT

Mr. Mike Cassidy (Ottawa Centre): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister for International Trade and deals with the announcement made late last night or early this morning that the final text of the trade agreement was apparently completed this morning but that it would be another 48 to 84 or 86 hours before it becomes available to the public. Therefore, the text of the agreement will not be available to the public before the conclusion of public hearings by the Commons committee which will be concluded today. That ludicrous result will mean that no group and no witness will be able to comment on the text of the agreement before the Government signs it on January 2.

Are there many changes agreed to in the final signing of the agreement last night since October 3? Does the Minister believe that barely one week of public study by Parliament of the agreement, beginning late this week until late next week, will be sufficient for a commercial agreement which can affect this country for the next half century and which will see the sell-out of Canada to the United States?

Hon. Pat Carney (Minister for International Trade): Mr. Speaker, I can tell the House that we have occasion to mark an historic agreement which the negotiators concluded on the weekend. The process that will be followed is that the lawyers are taking a last look at the language of the agreement. It will go to the respective Governments to be ratified, and it will be released as soon as it can be published.