

*Oral Questions*

National Health and Welfare, in announcing a continuation of the ban on urea formaldehyde which she announced on December 17, said, and I quote, "The government is victimized by a lack of knowledge."

The minister knows that she was advised by a report of a committee that was given to her in June, 1980, of the health hazards of this product, and again in another report on December 8 on which the decision was based. The committee said:

The committee is therefore not prepared to recommend any level of formaldehyde exposure as inherently safe.

That was the final report released today. My question therefore to the minister is this. What steps does she propose to take to protect the health of the quarter million or more Canadians who live in anywhere from 60,000 to 100,000 homes which have had this insulation installed, many of them under government licence through the CHIP program?

**Hon. Monique Bégin (Minister of National Health and Welfare):** Madam Speaker, we have estimated the number of Canadian homes insulated with UFFI at between 60,000 and 80,000. According to the data we now have, most of them are problem free. We will be making an assessment to determine the exact number of family units which may have badly installed foam. This will be done through a survey conducted by the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources by sampling 800 of these houses.

**Mr. McGrath:** Perhaps the minister might tell the House how she was able to determine that these homes were problem free before the sampling that she just announced is undertaken. How has she satisfied herself that these homes are problem free when the report states that any level of gas from this substance is dangerous, and when she announced in her press statement this morning, and I quote:

—it can produce allergic responses in sensitive individuals. It has also been shown to produce cancer in laboratory animals.

That is a very serious problem. The minister knows that the state of Massachusetts has already banned it and that the United States government has taken steps. Now she tells us she has nothing to offer the one quarter million Canadians who are stuck holding the bag because she says she has been short-changed.

**Miss Bégin:** Madam Speaker, I do not think that shouting or looking emotional will help—

**Some hon. Members:** Oh, oh!

**Miss Bégin:** —anybody understand exactly the meaning of the ban we are confirming today. Canada is the first western world country to ban the use of UFFI in insulating houses. We announced it first as a temporary ban on December 17, based on the best knowledge we had and as soon as we received it.

The responsibility of the health minister is to inform Canadians of exactly what we know and what we do not know. The considered opinion of the committee of experts was that it was better to risk losing some jobs for Canadians and to

announce a ban on the use of that foam. That is what we are doing.

As I stated in my first answer, the department received complaints before I announced the ban. Since the temporary ban of December 17, the problems have been extensively discussed through a lot of media coverage. This informed the public, who in turn told us of their problems, or made inquiries. That is how we know that the UFFI was properly installed in many homes and will not cause health problems.

## REQUEST THAT NATIONAL SURVEY BE CONDUCTED

**Hon. James A. McGrath (St. John's East):** We are concerned and my colleagues will express concern at what has happened to the thousands of jobs that have been lost. But if I express any emotion, Madam Speaker, it is on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of Canadians whose health could be seriously threatened.

● (1420)

**Some hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Mr. McGrath:** Surely, Madam Speaker, that is the responsibility of the Minister of National Health and Welfare. I would ask her this question. She knows that the U.S. government has already started public hearings preliminary to announcing a ban; she knows that at least two states banned it over a year ago; she knows this problem was flagged about seven or eight years ago in the Government of Canada, and she knows there have been three different government departments involved in this, yet she has not acted, and today she tells us—

**Madam Speaker:** Order, please. The hon. member, especially on a second supplementary question, should ask a precise question.

**Mr. McGrath:** Madam Speaker, I would like to ask the minister what she can tell Canadians in about 60,000 to 80,000 homes who are exposed to this potentially dangerous gas? The only consolation they have is instruction from the minister to call their nearest regional health office. Is she going to undertake a national survey to determine just exactly the extent of the health hazard? That is a simple question, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Monique Bégin (Minister of National Health and Welfare):** Madam Speaker, I want to correct again a few facts which are wrongly put forward by the hon. member. The United States has not banned the use of UFFI. The Consumer Products Safety Commission has only recommended prohibition, and we do not know what the new administration will do with that recommendation. I want the record straight. When the member speaks of a long period of time over which information was kept from the public, that is false. I want to put the record straight again.

As soon as we collected enough expert evidence that formed a body of knowledge for an opinion permitting us to ban, we immediately moved to action. There was one week of interval