

## OPINION: MEDICAL ISOTOPES

# Canadian medical isotopes: A problem in search of a solution

Cleverly disguised as support for innovation in the cyclotron option, the federal government strategy lacks a coherent long-term vision required to move us away from week-to-week crisis management.

By JATIN NATHWANI  
AND DONALD WALLACE

In 2007, Canada and the world were thrust into a major medical crisis in a remarkably short period of time. Unbeknownst to most Canadians, our nation was the world's leading supplier of medical isotopes and the source of those isotopes—the National Research Universal reactor at Chalk River, Ont., operated by Atomic Energy of Canada Limited—had been ordered shut down by the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission.

The nuclear medicine community quickly made politicians aware of the repercussions of this action. With more than one million medical procedures using isotopes each year in Canada, they were listened to. In an extraordinary series of events, legislation was introduced in the Commons to overrule the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, witnesses were heard on the floor of the Chamber and a bill was passed with all-party support in a single day. The NRU reactor was restarted within a week. A month later, the government fired the head of the safety commission, Linda Keen.

Much has happened since December 2007. If anything, the crisis has only deepened. The NRU reactor functioned reasonably well between December 2007 and May 2009 when it was again shut down automatically by a power outage. A leak of heavy water was subsequently discovered and the reactor has been out of action ever since. Despite many promises by AECL, the restart date has been pushed back again and again.

To make matters much worse, a Dutch reactor that also supplies isotopes was shut down for maintenance in February for six months. These two reactors had supplied two-thirds of the world's medical isotopes.

Last year was especially eventful on the isotope front. In June 2009, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that Canada was getting out of the isotopes business altogether, abandoning a 60-year history of global leadership. Then-natural resources minister Lisa Raitt was caught on tape

saying that the isotope issue was "sexy ... radioactive leaks ... cancer." The minister's musings to an aide aside, she also commissioned an expert panel to look at the isotope issue; it reported late last year.

Among its recommendations, the expert panel emphasized the need for Canada to: diversify all aspects of the isotope supply chain to prevent the disastrous consequences we've seen; construct a new multi-purpose research reactor that would also produce isotopes; re-examine the decision by AECL to cancel the replacement program for the NRU two years ago; support research and development for non-reactor-based sources of isotopes; and promote greater use of isotopes in medical imaging.

The Harper government's response to the panel came at the end of March and in the federal budget. Most significantly, the government chose a path that fails to deliver a reasonable degree of certainty to the supply of isotopes.

The government's decision to ignore the pivotal recommendation concerning a



Photograph by Cynthia Munster, The Hill Times

**Medical isotopes issue:** Then-natural resources minister Lisa Raitt, pictured last June on Parliament Hill after she was caught on tape describing the medical isotope shortage issue as 'sexy.' Other countries have made isotopes a key priority. Why not Canada, ask Jatin Nathwani and Donald Wallace.

new multi-purpose reactor should be deeply troubling to all Canadians. A brave recommendation that would put us on a sustainable path to a robust supply was pushed aside. The modest financial support in the budget will go instead to the search for alternative isotopes sources, an approach that remains unproven. Cleverly disguised as support for innovation in the cyclotron option, the government strategy lacks a coherent long-term vision required to move us away from week-to-week crisis management.

Canada has lurched from crisis to crisis over the past three years. Equipment failures in old reactors are a real problem but equally the absence of a coherent long-term strategy has left its mark. We have also learned that the international community has failed to work together to chart a way forward. But today, despite this painful awareness, we are in a worse place than we were in December 2007. The world's two major isotope-producing reactors—one of them Canadian—are out of action.

This issue is really about ensuring the best healthcare for Canadians and pursuing cutting-edge research to assist this worthy goal. We're good at the isotopes business, actually very good. The expert panel issued a challenge to the federal government to lead. Leadership requires courage and a coherent view of the future that integrates the demands of the healthcare system with the promise of a robust supply of isotopes.

Other countries have made isotopes a key priority including the Dutch, the Belgians, the South Africans and the Australians. If they can take bold actions, why won't Canada?

Jatin Nathwani is professor and Ontario Research Chair in Public Policy for Sustainable Energy at the University of Waterloo. Donald Wallace is a Toronto-based consultant. They are editors of *Canada's Isotope Crisis: What's Next?* published recently by McGill-Queen's University Press and the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University.

## University of Ottawa



The University of Ottawa is pleased to announce the appointment of **Robert Giroux** as Chair of the Board of Governors effective June 21, 2010. Mr. Giroux is a uOttawa alumnus having received both undergraduate and graduate degrees specializing in economics. He has held several high level positions in the public service and was president of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. He is an exceptional leader with an in depth knowledge of global issues and a thorough understanding of university governance that will greatly serve the University of Ottawa.



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## ACEC to Welcome New Chairman, Wilfrid Morin, ing.

OTTAWA – On June 26, 2010, Wilfrid Morin, ing., will officially assume the role of Chairman of the Board of Directors with the Association of Consulting Engineering Companies (ACEC) for the 2010-2011 term.

Wilfrid Morin is ranked among the top leaders in the Canadian consulting engineering industry. His career spans over 35 years, where he has held numerous management positions with his firm Teknika HIBA, now a Trow Global Company. Most recently, he was appointed Chief Operating Officer overseeing operations in Canada, the United States and internationally.

Mr. Morin holds a civil engineering degree from Sherbrooke University (1971) and a Masters degree in Applied Sciences from the University of Waterloo (1972). His contributions to the development of the consulting engineering profession have earned him many high distinctions. Most recently, he received the 2010 Award of Excellence from the Ordre des ingénieurs du Québec.

ACEC looks forward to Wilfrid Morin's strong leadership as he assumes his post as Chairman of the Board.

ACEC represents companies across Canada that provide professional engineering services to both public and private sector clients. Canadian consulting engineering services are a \$21.8 billion a year industry that employs 100,000 Canadians. Canada is also the 4<sup>th</sup> largest exporter of engineering services in the world.

For more information, please visit [www.acec.ca](http://www.acec.ca).



Mr. Wilfrid Morin, ing.

OTTAWA – Le 26 juin 2010, Wilfrid Morin, ing., assumera officiellement le rôle de président du conseil d'administration au sein de l'Association des firmes d'ingénieurs-conseils (AFIC) pour le mandat 2010-2011.

Wilfrid Morin fait partie des principaux leaders de l'industrie canadienne du génie-conseil. Sa carrière s'est déroulée sur une période de 35 ans, pendant laquelle il a occupé plusieurs postes de cadre supérieur au sein de sa firme Teknika HIBA, qui s'est jointe au groupe d'entreprises de Trow Global. Plus récemment, M. Morin a été promu au poste de chef de l'exploitation et il superviserait à ce titre toutes les activités d'exploitation au Canada, aux États-Unis et dans le reste du monde.

M. Morin détient un diplôme en génie civil obtenu à l'Université de Sherbrooke en 1971, ainsi qu'une maîtrise en sciences appliquées obtenue à l'Université de Waterloo en 1972. Ses contributions au développement de la profession d'ingénieur-conseil lui ont valu de nombreuses distinctions importantes. Récemment, il a reçu le prix Excellence de l'Ordre des ingénieurs du Québec (2010).

L'AFIC attend avec impatience le leadership solide dont Wilfrid Morin fera preuve en tant que président du conseil d'administration.

L'AFIC représente des firmes dans l'ensemble du Canada qui fournissent des services professionnels en matière d'ingénierie à des clients du secteur public et privé. Les services d'ingénierie-conseil au Canada représentent une industrie valant 21,8 milliards de dollars par an et employant 100 000 Canadiens. Le Canada est également le 4<sup>e</sup> plus gros exportateur de services d'ingénierie-conseil au monde.

Pour obtenir de plus amples renseignements, veuillez visiter le site [www.acec.ca](http://www.acec.ca).



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