

Dr. Chris Milburn wants health authority to tell public reason for firing

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After two and a half years as Cape Breton's top ER doctor, Chris Milburn was fired over the phone.

The call came five days after Milburn joined a CBC radio panel where he was invited to offer his opinion on COVID policies in the province. Specifically, the province's handling of the third wave and the school reopening plan.

The often polarizing and outspoken doctor stayed true to form. He discussed uncertainty around the COVID vaccine, said there was no scientific basis to shut down schools temporarily across the province in May and implied Dr. Robert Strang had acquired too much power and was unwilling to give it up.

The June 15 call came from Dr. Don Brien, medical executive director of the eastern zone, informing Milburn he was fired from his role as head of emergency medicine for the eastern zone.

"Dr. Brien explained to me that my views were unacceptable for someone in my position," said Milburn. "I was clearly told that I was fired because of my views."

Milburn believes the authority's intent is to silence him as well others in the medical community wanting to raise concerns about the province's COVID policies. He's still practising emergency medicine across the eastern zone. His views, he argues, are a needed counterpoint against changing and largely unchallenged directives around COVID in Nova Scotia.

He said he was fired without cause and given six months' notice. His firing was not communicated to him in writing. During his conversation with Brien, he said he asked that the health authority publicly explain its decision to fire him. Brien said that an internal memo would be circulated, informing health authority staff of Milburn's dismissal. Milburn asked that the memo include the reason for his firing and that it was without cause. That didn't happen.

On June 16, the day after the telephone conversation, Brien's executive assistant issued a memo to eastern zone staff and physicians confirming that there had been a change in leadership for emergency medicine in the zone. The document was from Brien and Madonna MacDonald, the health authority's vice-president of

operations. The memo also stated that they were looking for an interim replacement for Milburn and hoped to announce the person soon.

“It taints me in a way because there was no problem with my performance in that role unless there is something they never told me,” said Milburn. “I’d just like the health authority to clarify why they let me go.”

Milburn also took issue with Strang's public reaction to his comments on the radio program. Milburn said the reporter questioning Strang misinterpreted his views, suggesting that he’s advising against people getting vaccinated and that Strang is power-hungry. Milburn himself is vaccinated and he said Strang has simply been given too much power governing people's behaviour and that it’s human nature not to want to relinquish that power.

Milburn said he was irked by Strang's suggestion that he stay out of the business of public health. “He’s trained as an emergency physician (and) I’m trained as a public health physician,” said Strang at the COVID briefing two days after the radio program. “I don’t try to practise emergency medicine; he shouldn’t try to practise public health medicine.”

Milburn sat on the Canadian Medical Association’s public health committee between 2012-16, serving as chair for a year. He’s also been a member of Doctors Nova Scotia's public health committee for eight years, chairing the group for the past two years.

“It’s not like I don’t know anything about public health,” said Milburn. “I’ve been involved with it nationally, provincially and locally for a number of years and have read copiously about it. Yes, I don’t have my degree in it, but I’m sure interested in it. And experienced. It was a little weird being dismissed like that.”

Milburn also took issue with Strang suggesting that both areas of medicine operate in silos. “Our jobs are intimately connected and intertwined,” said Milburn. “You can’t say I’ll go over here and do public health and you go over there and do emergency medicine and we won’t talk to each other.”

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