Eastern Health to Enhance Cancer Care for Aboriginal People in Labrador

March 11, 2014 – Happy Valley–Goose Bay, NL: Eastern Health today announced the launch of a three-year initiative entitled Journey in the Big Land, aimed at enhancing cancer care services for Labrador Inuit, Innu and members of the NunatuKavut Community Council.

The initiative was made possible with $800,000 from the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer which is an independent organization funded by the Federal Government to accelerate action on cancer control for all Canadians. The funding was awarded to the Cancer Care Program of Eastern Health which provides programs and services to all residents of the province. The initiative recognizes the unique challenges faced by many Aboriginal People when confronted with a cancer diagnosis, including language barriers, cultural differences and geographical isolation from primary care to secondary and tertiary health centres.

“This initiative represents the most significant partnership to date with our partners in Labrador,” said Vickie Kaminski, President and CEO, Eastern Health. “With the help of patients, families, Labrador-Grenfell Health and our partner Aboriginal governments and organizations, we have gained first-hand insight into the complexity of social, cultural and jurisdictional issues facing our patients of Labrador’s Aboriginal groups. The result is a blueprint for an enhanced standard of care that is tailored to the needs of this population and is both inclusive and culturally sensitive.”

The initiative will focus on three priority areas. They are to:

- Enhance transitions in care between hospital and community setting;
- Expand Tele-Oncology for enhanced consultation between oncology specialists and Labrador-Grenfell physicians, nurses in community clinics and patients themselves; and,
- Increase cultural sensitivity through employee training programs, information packages in the languages of the Labrador Aboriginal groups and the placement of Labrador imagery at the Dr. H. Bliss Murphy Cancer Centre.

The framework for the Journey in the Big Land initiative was developed as a result of a stakeholder forum held in Happy Valley-Goose Bay in October of 2013. It was attended by representatives of Eastern Health, Labrador-Grenfell Health, Nunatsiavut Government, NunatuKavut Community Council, the Innu Nation and Aboriginal cancer patients, family members and community elders. Also in attendance were representatives of the Canadian Cancer Society and the Dr. H. Bliss Murphy Cancer Care Foundation.

“The cancer care journey for Inuit living in Labrador is very complex and often means extended periods of time away from home, family, and friends. The cultural challenges that Labrador Inuit face, while being away for assessment and treatment, is an additional stress in an already difficult time,” said Patricia Kemuksigak, Minister
of Health and Social Development, Nunatsiavut Government. “The Nunatsiavut Government is committed to the partnership in this initiative to enhance and improve high quality care closer to home. This funding from the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer will give us the ability to work with our partners to make significant improvements to the cancer care experiences of Labrador Inuit.”

NunatuKavut Community Council President, Todd Russell said: “This project is the result of commitment, collaboration and community involvement. For almost three years, NunatuKavut has been a part of a provincial Cancer Services Quality Committee; had an opportunity to be a part of community workshop last Fall to discuss this project and we are happy to support and be involved in this important initiative that will help make a difference to our people.”

According to a 2011 report by the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer entitled First Nations, Inuit and Metis Action Plan on Cancer Control, although cancer among the country’s Aboriginal Peoples was relatively uncommon just two generations ago, rates of common cancers have gone up in the past few decades. In some Aboriginal populations, these rates are now at, or above the incidence in the general Canadian population.

Consultations leading up to the Journey in the Big Land initiative provided the first opportunity for all interested parties to exchange views and experiences and collaborate on ways to enhance cancer care for Labrador’s Aboriginal People.

“Labrador-Grenfell Health welcomes the opportunity to partner with Eastern Health to establish important linkages with Aboriginal People in our region who are diagnosed with cancer and require information and treatment about their condition,” says Tony Wakeham, CEO, Labrador-Grenfell Health. “People who live in remote communities and whose first language is not English, need to understand their diagnosis, treatment and follow-up care. This involves improving the exchange of information between health care providers at Labrador-Grenfell Health’s community clinics and hospitals, and cancer specialists at Eastern Health.”

The Journey in the Big Land initiative will enable the Aboriginal People of Labrador who are diagnosed with cancer to be more actively involved in their health care, according to Katherine Chubbs, Eastern Health’s Vice President of Cancer Care, a native of Lodge Bay, Labrador, who spent several years working in Labrador’s health care system.

“Thanks to funding from the Partnership, we will work toward bringing high quality cancer care closer to home by expanding services throughout Labrador and providing a more familiar environment when our patients must travel to our facilities in St. John’s. We have listened to what they had to say – and we have heard them,” added Ms. Chubbs. “Now we must provide patients of Labrador’s Aboriginal People with the information they need in a way they understand, encourage them to seek help early and increase their comfort level with their cancer journey, as together we work towards more positive outcomes.”

About Eastern Health

Eastern Health is the largest, integrated health authority in Newfoundland and Labrador employing approximately 13,000 dedicated employees and serving a population of more than 300,000 people. The authority has an annual budget of approximately $1.3 billion and offers the full continuum of health and community services including public health, long-term care, community services, hospital care and unique provincial programs and services. Its
geographic boundaries extend from St. John’s west to Port Blandford including all communities on the Avalon, Burin and Bonavista Peninsulas.

Media Contact:
Zelda Burt
Media Relations Manager
Eastern Health
T: (709) 777.1339
Zelda.Burt@easternhealth.ca