Registered Nurses’of Ontario (RNAO) Windsor/Essex Chapter

Seeking a Moratorium on Nuclear Energy Decisions until Further Research has been Done

My name is Jennifer Johnston and I am a Registered Nurse and the current President of the Windsor/Essex Chapter of the Registered Nurses’ Association of Ontario (RNAO). I stand before you, not only as a citizen, and a voter, but as a representative of the over 30,000 Registered Nurses who belong to the RNAO, and as a voice for the over 112,000 nurses in Ontario.

As frontline healthcare staff who provide care and compassion to others on a daily basis, nurses are concerned with the health and welfare of our communities. As such, we watch the devastation that has arisen in Japan following the earthquake, tsunami and subsequent nuclear disaster on March 11th and we are troubled by what we see. The human suffering and threats to public safety are being felt worldwide and many countries are re-evaluating their nuclear energy strategies. Since the 1960s, nuclear power has been part of Ontario’s energy supply and currently provides more than half of the power used by Ontarians every day. We currently have 3 active nuclear Power plant sites: Pickering Generating Station and the Bruce Power Station site North of Kincardin, were built in the 1970’s & 80’s, while Darlington Generating Station which is just north of Pickering, was built in the 1980’s & early 90’s. At this time, the Ontario Government is making decisions about the fate of these aging sites and about the future of nuclear energy in our province.

Close to home in Amherstburg and surrounding Windsor/Essex County, we must be cognizant of the proximity of the Fermi 2 nuclear power plant just across the border in Michigan. More than 40 years ago, a since-decommissioned nuclear power plant in the same region caused a scare when 40 pounds of nuclear fuel melted at Fermi 1 on October 5th, 1966. This was due to a metal part in the reactor breaking off and blocking the flow of sodium coolant. The wake-up call of such an incident lead to its eventual closure in 1972.

Ontario nurses as represented by the RNAO are not persuaded by government and nuclear industry leaders here at home that try to assure us about the safety of this industry. The Japanese nuclear industry reiterated those claims prior to the earthquake. The same happened in the United States prior to the 1979 Three Mile Island partial core meltdown. On March 14, 2011 Wayne Robbins, Ontario Power Generation's chief nuclear officer, said that Ontario is in a geologically stable part of the world and that "we have a lot of back-up safety systems." That same day, around 11:30 p.m., a failed pump seal from the Pickering nuclear power plant caused 73,000 litres of demineralized water to be released into Lake Ontario - a fresh water supply for millions of people in Southwestern Ontario. Then, on March 16, a small 4.3 magnitude earthquake hit eastern Ontario. Both are reminders that nature is a force unto itself, back-up systems can fail anywhere in the world, and nuclear power is an unforgiving technology.

The staggering health, environmental, and economic costs of nuclear power were good reasons to stop investing in nuclear power even before the tragic disaster unfolding in Japan. It is irresponsible to move forward with plans to build new reactors or refurbish existing ones without stopping to learn from Japan's nuclear tragedy. This is not the first time that RNAO has expressed concerns regarding the use of nuclear power, as cited in our provincial election platform, Creating Vibrant Communities.

Added to the safety concerns is the exorbitant financial cost of nuclear power. The Provincial government is budgeting $33 billion for its nuclear plans, which alone would elbow out other more cost-efficient and environmentally sound investments. The nuclear industry has a dismal fiscal track record: every nuclear project in Ontario has gone considerably over-budget, on average about two and a half times what was initially announced. Ontarians concerned about their rising hydro bills are still paying for the huge cost overruns from reactors built decades ago.

The health impacts of human-produced radiation include cancer, genetic damage, birth defects, mental disability due to in-utero exposure, immune system dysfunction and diabetes. Although fears arising from a large-scale accident or melt-down are most in our minds of late, the real danger of radiation has been shown to be in chronic low-level exposures. The effects are poorly understood, particularly in children, and studies have linked increased prevalence of leukemia in children with living near nuclear facilities.

Without further research and discussion, many lives could be negatively impacted by the choices being made on Parliament Hill and in meetings such as this. This is why we are urging the Amherstburg Town Council to consider supporting a moratorium on decisions being made regarding nuclear energy until further research is done. Tell other Ontario politicians to stop and rethink the consequences of investing in more nuclear energy. Consider alternate forms of energy production, consider conservation and renewable sources. Stop and Rethink the possibilities.