



**Greenpeace/RNAO
Media Conference
Safety of Nuclear Technology
Queen's Park Media Studio**

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RNAO Speaking Notes – Doris Grinspun, Executive Director, RNAO

Nuclear Technology

Thank you, Shawn-Patrick. The Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO) is the professional organization representing registered nurses in Ontario. It is the strong, credible voice leading the nursing profession to influence and promote healthy public policy.

Like all Canadians, and people around the world, our hearts go out to the people of Japan who are dealing with unthinkable tragedy. We admire their courage and resilience even as the full extent of the disaster is still unknown.

We know that the best and brightest of the world's nuclear technologists and engineers are working around the clock to prevent further catastrophe and we wish them all the best. As their efforts on the other side of the globe inspire us with hope, our government and the nuclear industry here in Ontario assure us it could never happen here and we have nothing to worry.

Let us not be smug. No doubt the nuclear experts and government leaders in Japan were confident that the sheer magnitude of this week's disaster could never happen

there. But of course it could, and it did. Nuclear power is an unforgiving technology. Japan reminds us that all nuclear reactors are vulnerable to the potentially deadly combination of human error, design failure and natural disaster.

If ever there was a time to be concerned about nuclear power, it is now. Indeed, the images we've seen over the past few days on traditional and social media mandate that we pause to stop and think.

Like many Ontarians, registered nurses are increasingly concerned about nuclear power. RNAO already warned against nuclear power before this terrible tragedy hit Japan, and now we are convinced that nuclear power is not the answer. It's unsafe, It's expensive. It's not clean. Reactors take years to build. They present radiation risks and they produce large amounts of radioactive waste that must be stored forever.

We know safer and more affordable alternatives are available. That's why we are here today side by side with Greenpeace to make an urgent appeal to government and all political parties, for sober second thought.

As nurses, we know how environmental factors affect our clients and patients. People have a right to safe drinking water, clean air and to live in an environment free of toxics. Given the seriousness of environmental pollution and the potential devastation of radiation in particular, nurses believe the precautionary principle must prevail.

A commonly accepted statement of the precautionary principle is: “When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.”

It is important that the process of applying the precautionary principle be open, informed, democratic and include potentially affected parties. It must also involve an examination of the full range of alternatives, including no action.

Just imagine for a moment how different our world would be today if we had adopted the precautionary principle to a few products once considered safe -- cigarettes, DDT, thalidomide and various food additives. Had we adopted the precautionary principle, these hazardous products might not have seen the light of

day. It's our view that radiation must be added to the list until experts can be sure what constitutes a safe dose of radiation exposure.

Studies have linked human-produced radiation with cancers, genetic damage, birth defects, mental disability due to in utero exposure, immune system dysfunction and diabetes. There is the fear of the large-scale accident or meltdown that has made Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and perhaps now Fukushima part of the common lexicon. But the real danger of radiation may well be the chronic low-level exposures, the effects of which are poorly understood, particularly in children. If for no other reason, this cries out for application of the precautionary principle.

While there are relatively few Canadian studies on the deleterious effects of low levels of radiation on health, there is evidence linking increased prevalence of leukemia in children and living near nuclear facilities. Higher rates of congenital abnormalities have also been documented. A 2008 German study (KiKK study) showed a statistically significant relationship between risk of leukemia and living within ten kilometres of a nuclear plant with consistent results across all 16 nuclear power plants in Germany.

I could go on. For example, we should all be alarmed by the fact that after 50 years of generating nuclear power in this province, we still haven't found a permanent solution to dispose of nuclear waste. Just down the road at the Pickering nuclear power station for example, 20-thousand tonnes of highly radioactive waste has already been produced and is being stored on site.

Then there is the financial cost of nuclear power. Nuclear power is prohibitively expensive. While the government itself is budgeting \$33 billion for its nuclear plans, which alone would elbow out other more cost-efficient and environmentally sound investments, the fiscal track record of nuclear projects is not impressive.

Every nuclear project in Ontario has gone considerably over-budget, on average about two and a half times. Ontarians concerned about their rising hydro bills are still paying for the huge cost overruns from reactors built decades ago. If Finance Minister Duncan wants to get control of the province's finances in his budget on March 29th, RNAO's prescription is simple: scrap the risky, expensive plans to build new nuclear reactors.

Ontario now has safe and clean alternatives to the unacceptable health risks of nuclear power. My colleague, Dr. Keith Stewart will address this. It is time to

invoke the precautionary principle and phase out Ontario's dependence on nuclear power.

That's why the RNAO is proud to join Greenpeace here this morning. It is precisely because what happened in Japan could happen anywhere there is nuclear technology that the RNAO is calling for the indefinite postponement of the public hearings on new nuclear reactors at Darlington that are scheduled to start next week.

Other countries get it. Germany and Switzerland head a growing list of countries that are watching the ongoing instability of the Fukushima reactors and are recognizing that this is not the time to be talking about plans to expand nuclear facilities. Premier McGuinty, Mr. Hudak, Ms. Horwath – join us in calling for a time-out, a step back. Next week's hearings examining a proposal to build new nuclear reactors must be postponed at least until there is a transparent and robust assessment of their cost-effectiveness and safety. Let's be wise and not regret later!

Thank you.