Green party leader Elizabeth May is calling on the government to develop a national strategy for improved treatment of Lyme disease, saying Canada's standards for diagnosis are outdated and lag far behind those in the United States.

The Saanich-Gulf Islands MP tabled a private member's bill on Thursday calling for a national conference of public health officials, researchers and patient advocates as a first step toward developing a national strategy for diagnosing and treating the disease.

Lyme disease is caused by three species of bacteria transmitted to humans via ticks. Early symptoms may include fever, headache, fatigue and a characteristic circular rash, shaped like a bull's eye, around the bite.

"Tragically, because we don't have consistent and effective guidelines for testing in order to reliably detect the various types and strains of Lyme disease, there is too often a failure to diagnose sufferers," May said in a statement. "This means that every year hundreds, even thousands, of Canadians either go untreated or are required to go to the United States for treatment."

Provincial health officer Dr. Perry Kendall disagreed with May's assessment.

"There is admittedly controversy over Lyme disease diagnosis and treatment, and undoubtedly more to learn," Kendall said, adding that "the great majority of public health, infectious disease and laboratory specialists who are involved in this area would take issue" with May's statement.

In B.C., between 200 and 250 people receive antibiotics each year for possible acute Lyme disease, Kendall said.

And while May credited the Canadian Lyme Disease Foundation for its work on tick-borne infections, Kendall said there is a disjunct between the position of the research group and that of most experts when it comes to the size of the problem, testing and longterm treatment.

For example, Kendall said, all accredited public health labs throughout North America agree on the two-step testing method criticized by CanLyme. The testing used by non-public health labs in the United States have been discounted as unreliable, he said.

In addition, B.C. has different species of ticks than the East and fewer of them carry the disease. Only one in 200 ticks in B.C. test positive for Lyme bacteria, Kendall said - a number that has been relatively stable over the past decade.

"We are fairly confident we are not missing the peak epidemic of Lyme disease in B.C.," Kendall said.

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