

Monday, January 11, 2016

Hon. Dustin Duncan, MLA
Ministry of Health, Room 204, Legislative Building
2405 Legislative Drive
Regina SK S4S 0B3

Dear Minister Duncan,

Re: New progress report on the state of provincial and territorial child hearing health programs

We are writing on behalf of Speech-Language and Audiology Canada (SAC) and the Canadian Infant Hearing Task Force (CIHTF) to give you an advance copy of the CIHTF's new Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) Progress Report and Position Statement, both of which will be officially released on January 18, 2016.

The new progress report is an interim status update on the EHDI Report Card, also included with this letter, which we published on March 25, 2014. You may recall reviewing the report card in February 2015 when members of SAC, the CIHTF and the Elks of Canada met with you to discuss the need for an EHDI program in your province.

Overall, the progress report provides a rather disappointing picture of the state of EHDI programs in Canada. While a handful of provinces are now running comprehensive EHDI programs, several other regions, like Saskatchewan, lag far behind.

Experts have described permanent childhood hearing loss as a neurological emergency, and studies have shown that extended periods of auditory deprivation can have a significant impact on a child's overall brain development. Moreover, if a child's hearing loss goes undetected and untreated, that child is more likely to experience lifelong linguistic, cognitive, academic, social and emotional difficulties. It is therefore imperative that all children in Canada, regardless of which province or territory they live in, have access to excellent early hearing health services.

We acknowledge that there are many dedicated audiologists and other professionals working in Saskatchewan to try to improve the state of your province's early hearing health programs. However, far too many babies are still not being screened for hearing loss at birth and there is a shortage of appropriate provincial diagnostic and intervention services available to children with hearing deficits.

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Your province's current system, in which a public health nurse provides a general health screening, is simply not an effective way to identify hearing issues. Objective measures such as the automated physiological screening equipment at the Royal University Hospital must be used not only on babies born in the Saskatoon Health Region, but on *every single baby* born in Saskatchewan. The status quo needs to change, but without a strong commitment from your government the implementation of a comprehensive EHDI program is nearly impossible.

The upcoming Conference of Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers of Health is an ideal opportunity for you to consult with provinces that have implemented strong EHDI programs, such as British Columbia and Ontario. The new federal government appears to welcome this type of pan-Canadian collaboration and knowledge sharing. As you are aware, Prime Minister Trudeau's mandate letter to Dr. Jane Philpott, Minister of Health, outlines the following as a top priority:

"...advance pan-Canadian collaboration on health innovation to encourage the adoption of new digital health technology to improve access, increase efficiency and improve outcomes for patients."

We encourage you to make time at your meeting later this month to talk to your provincial and territorial counterparts about how Saskatchewan can begin developing and implementing a comprehensive EHDI program. It's time to make our children's hearing health a national priority.

Sincerely,



Dr. Chantal Kealey, AuD, Aud(C)
Director of Audiology and Communication Health Assistants
Speech-Language and Audiology Canada



Dr. Steve Aiken, PhD
Chair of the Canadian Infant Hearing Task Force
Associate Professor, Dalhousie University