

Monday, January 11, 2016

Hon. Gaétan Barrette, MNA
Minister of Health and Social Services
Catherine-de-Longpré Building, 1075 Ch. Sainte-Foy, 15th Floor
Québec QC G1S 2M1

Dear Minister Barrette,

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. 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, many other regions, including Québec, still lag far behind.

Although Québec announced plans for a comprehensive EHDI program in 2009, it is our understanding that full implementation has been delayed due to ongoing funding issues. As stated in the 2014 EHDI Report Card, only 20-25% of babies born in your province are screened for hearing loss at birth. Further, within your province's current system, the children who do receive an initial newborn hearing screening are not consistently monitored for longer-term communication health issues. As a result, children born in Québec are at a disadvantage compared to those born in neighbouring provinces like New Brunswick and Ontario, both of which have strong EHDI programs.

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.

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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 increased 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."

In closing, we encourage you to make time at your meeting later this month to talk to your provincial and territorial counterparts about how Québec can implement 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