

Make your voices heard: Don't let the report on child and youth health fade away



Gary Pekeles MD FRCPC

Injury prevention, childhood obesity, mental health, Aboriginal child and youth health – these are among the top priorities for the Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS). They are also the focal points of a report from the federally appointed Advisor on Healthy Children and Youth, Dr K Kellie Leitch (1).

The report hones in on some of the most important health problems facing young Canadians. If the federal government acts on the key elements of the 100-plus recommendations, there is potential for progress on some pervasive health issues.

Dr Leitch's report was quietly released by Health Canada in March, six months after it was completed. Since the release, there has been no public response from the federal government. With the House slated to rise for summer break in a matter of weeks, the lack of enthusiasm for the report is very disconcerting.

The CPS met with Dr Leitch several times during her consultations, and the good news is that she heard us. The key recommendations in Dr Leitch's report echo what we have been telling governments about for some time, including developing a National Injury Prevention Strategy, and improving access to mental health services for children and youth, including establishing a wait time strategy for paediatric mental health.

We know that investments and informed public policy in child and youth mental health and injury prevention can net huge gains – both human and financial. About 14% or 1.1 million Canadians younger than 20 years of age suffer from mental health conditions that affect their daily lives. Unintentional injury remains the leading cause of death in children one to 14 years of age.

Dr Leitch also recommends establishing a National Office for Child and Youth Health, reporting to the Minister of Health, to look at the impact of all federal policies and

programs on young Canadians. While this Office would be a step forward, it should not preclude the appointment of a federal Canadian Commissioner for Children and Youth.

The CPS reiterates its call for a Commissioner, an independent voice to ensure that the views and needs of children and youth are considered in all relevant national public policy decisions – not just those strictly related to health. A Commissioner would push Canada to meet its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and as outlined in *A Canada Fit for Children, Canada's Plan of Action* (2).

The CPS supports Dr Leitch's proposal that the federal government adopt an integrated, 'whole of government' approach to the health of children and youth, and provide leadership in areas such as national standards, collaboration, surveillance, research and knowledge transfer, and social marketing to improve health outcomes. These are pivotal responsibilities that only the federal government can lead.

The CPS and many of its allies have responded to the report in a number of ways. We have written to federal Minister of Health, Tony Clement. We have met with Dr Leitch. We issued a joint news release with the Canadian Medical Association and the College of Family Physicians, two organizations we worked with to develop *Canada's Child and Youth Health Charter*; and we are trying to meet with federal officials, including the Minister.

We need your help. In the face of competing demands, the voice of children and youth and voices for children and youth are not well heard. This moment has the potential to be a turning point in the federal government's commitment to young Canadians.

As an advocate for children and youth, you can work with us. Write to the Minister of Health. Contact your local Member of Parliament (visit www.gc.ca and follow

President, Canadian Paediatric Society, Ottawa, Ontario

Correspondence: President, Canadian Paediatric Society, 2305 St Laurent Boulevard, Ottawa, Ontario K1G 4J8. Telephone 613-526-9397, fax 613-526-3332, Web sites www.cps.ca, www.caringforkids.cps.ca

Accepted for publication May 2008

the links to 'Contact your MP' for telephone and e-mail information). Share the report with others in your community, and encourage them to be active too. The voices of paediatricians, other doctors and health professionals on the frontline are powerful testaments to the need for action.

The CPS will continue its advocacy in support of the recommendations in the report, working with allied organizations across Canada. If the federal government hears from the hundreds and thousands of people taking

care of children and youth in the community and in hospitals, it may finally have no choice but to listen.

REFERENCE

1. Leitch KK. Reach for the Top: A Report by the Advisor on Healthy Children & Youth <www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/pubs/child-enfant/advisor-conseillere/index_e.html> (Version current at May 28, 2008).
 2. A Canada Fit for Children – April 2004. <www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/cs/sp/sdc/socpol/publications/2002-002483/page00.shtml> (Version current at May 22, 2008).
-
-