



John GORDON/Langley Times

Langley MP Mark Warawa accepts a 4,000-name petition from Surrey youngster Casey Walton, 6, and his mother Nancy, at his Langley constituency office Tuesday. The petition asks that autism treatment be covered by the Canada Health Act. Casey's sister, Justine, 8, looks on. Autism treatment was the subject of a recent Supreme Court of Canada case, in which the court said it was up to provinces to decide if they wished to include certain treatments.

MP accepts autism petition

AL IRWIN
Times Reporter

Palm up, an arm out to his pretty daughter, a proud father's silent gesture says it all: "Here is the proof. Autism can be beaten, with therapy. Now, where is the medical assistance every Canadian should be entitled to?"

Zoe Schmidt has been lighting up the room since she came into Langley MP Mark Warawa's Milner office. You'd look long and hard to find a perkier, brighter looking eight-year-old.

She is here with father Mike, mom Natasha, therapist Theresa Tournemille and other parents and kids to present Warawa with a 4,000-name petition.

The petition asks that medically necessary autism treatment be included in the Canada Health Act, and that academic chairs be created in universities across Canada to train consultants and therapists in ABA/IBI therapy.

They'd also like Warawa to table a private member's bill or work with other MPs to amend the tax act, to make costs of ABA/IBI therapy 100 per cent tax deductible.

Warawa had asked about the treatment's success, when Schmidt pointed to Zoe.

Warawa said before meeting the parents he believes the treatment is medically necessary, and while expensive "pays huge dividends."

But the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in November that government is not obligated to fund the ABA/IBI therapy.

Candi Kilgour, a young mother, told Warawa she was "basically cast adrift" after her middle child's diagnosis at age three, in September.

There are no specialists in Canada to design the individual programs required. These must be found in the U.S., and brought up to work with local therapists to develop a one-on-one program.

"Here is the phone number, good luck," was how Kilgour described the help she got.

She found a specialist in Philadelphia. "Basically, our whole world revolves around the therapy," said Kilgour. In just months, the difference has been "remarkable."

But the \$1,600 a month the government pays now doesn't cover all the costs, and Kilgour fears the end of that subsidy when her daughter reaches the age of six.

They'll keep up therapy though, despite the personal sacrifice. The therapy can cost upwards of \$40,000, possibly as much as \$60,000 annually.

"You have to do it. I want her to go to school. I want her to get married, I want her to have friends," Kilgour said.

Zoe Schmidt is well on her way to a fulfilling life, after three years of treatment, says mother Natasha.

The early outlook was that she'd reach adulthood with a mental age of 10. Before treatment began, Zoe spoke only words she picked up from movies and television, but with no comprehension.

Today she keeps up with her Grade 2 peers, and the prognosis now is she'll have a normal, productive and independent adulthood.

Father Mike said the cost of therapy can decline with treatment, and the earlier it starts the better. He expects it will drop to \$15,000/\$20,000 a year in Zoe's case.

"(Zoe) has made such good progress, the cost of treatment dramatically drops."

The early costs are a good investment in the future, the parents told Warawa.

"You've made a believer out of me," Warawa told the parents.

"I don't know if many Canadians know about autism, or the impact and benefits of treatment," he said.

The Conservative MP said he can table the petition in the House once for each 25 names.

"You can count on numerous presentations," he promised. Interested people can get more information, and access petitions, from www.Canadaautism.com

In 1998, the B.C. Supreme Court trulked in favour of the provincial government funding the treatment.

This was overturned by the recent Supreme Court of Canada ruling,