

Inside Front

■ Education

Autism appeal under way

by Jordan Bateman

jbateman@langleyadvance.com

A Langley group is back in court, fighting for a treatment for their autistic children.

The provincial government is appealing a B.C. Supreme Court judgment that says it must fund the Lovaas method of treating children with autism.

In 2000, parents of children with autism won a decision saying the government should fund the treatment, which can cost

\$60,000 per year per child

"The inability to communicate is one of the hallmarks of autism," said lawyer Chris Hinkson, who is representing the parents. "These children, left untreated, will be doomed to a life of institutionalization and looking inwardly only

The cost may be steep, but it saves \$1 million per child down the road in health care costs, the parents say.

In 2000, then opposition MLA Rich Coleman told *The Advance*

News that the NDP's decision to appeal "disgusts me completely. I'm so mad. The government should make the decision to fund."

But now his government is in court, appealing, because judges must not have the right to order government to fund medically necessary health care.

"We have funded autism," said Coleman Thursday. "You can make a choice for your child."

— With files from *The Vancouver Sun*

■ Feature Letter

Autism appeal

Dear Editor,

Honourable Rich Coleman, says government "[has] funded autism ... you can make a choice for your child" [Autism appeal under way, Feb. 22, Langley Advance News]. No doubt the belief is sincere, but unfortunately inaccurate. The reality for suffering children remains bleak.

Government continues to discriminate against autistic children by not funding effective, medically necessary treatment ordered by the B.C. Supreme Court. What token funding has been allocated is squandered on unqualified, ineffective, government-contracted service providers left over from the NDP era – the same MCFD service providers discredited by the Supreme Court.

Autism policy seems designed to protect unionized contractor jobs, rather than provide effective autism health care. Victoria's autism "pilot project" is ineffective, and only includes 12 per cent of children five years of age and under. For parents who can't afford to pay for genuine autism treatment, their children are doomed to a life of institutionalization.

Government's position amounts to: Too bad, so sad – we have to draw the line somewhere.

The systemic mismanagement goes on. Just recently announced is a so-called "Individualized Funding" autism initiative. The program claims to offer families choice, but in fact offers a handful of unqualified service providers on a government approved list. It's as if government said, "Sure, you have a choice of surgeons, so long as it's one of three paramedics on the Ministry list."

And it gets worse. The new autism program has enough funding to "serve" only a select 12 per cent. Imagine if 88 per cent of children with cancer were wilfully shut out of Medicare. The public would be outraged. MLA's would neither defend nor condone such immorality.

Origins of the ongoing policy failure can be found at the offices of Children's Ministry bureaucrats who for years neglected children with autism under the NDP. The same crew presides over the autism dispute inherited by B.C. Liberals.

Elsewhere in government, senior policy makers at the Health Ministry have their own reason to sacrifice children with autism. They insist government must have a free hand to make discriminatory policy as it sees fit, without a judge ever looking over their shoulder saying, "No more." They claim Medicare will somehow be threatened if the courts order government to do the right thing for autistic children. Regrettably, the myth fabricated by health policy makers has been sold to the new government.

The facts are clear: a "permanent government" of savvy Victoria civil servants and UBC academics continues to harm children and squander scarce resources. This tyranny of the bureaucracy must be forcefully challenged by Ministers with courage and integrity. Until it is, the courts are all we have to protect vulnerable children from government discrimination and neglect.

Guest Editorial



S.K. Freeman, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Families for Early Autism Treatment of BC
Langley