

All autistics under six to get treatment

Promise made by lawyer for attorney-general

By **KIM PEMBERTON**

All autistic children in B.C. under the age of six will get treatment by the end of the year, a lawyer for the attorney-general's ministry promised Thursday.

But while the government is willing to provide early intervention services it doesn't believe the courts have the right to mandate such treatment, Lisa Mrozinski said.

Mrozinski made the pledge in an interview outside the B.C. Court of Appeal, where the province is appealing a ruling by B.C. Supreme Court Justice Marion Allan that the government is required to provide treatment for autistic children.

"The government will fund these services no matter what happens [in the appeal court]," she said. "The question is whether the government is constitutionally obligated to fund the services."

She added government must be able to determine what services it wants to fund because "clearly you can't fund every service. Where do you draw the line?"

Autism is a neurological condition that affects a person's ability to communicate and socialize. Research shows that 90 per cent of children who do not receive treatment for the disorder end up in institutional care.

In the appeal court Thursday, lawyer Chris Hinkson, who is representing four families who launched the original B.C. Supreme Court action, said after being ordered by the lower court to provide treatment, the government did so for only about 20 per cent of children under the age of six, with "an ineffective program."

"Without some intervention by the courts, the breach [of the Constitution] found by Madame Justice Allan does and will continue," he said. "The government is concerned with the precedent ... it's not just the four petitioners who will benefit but many others."

Hinkson said he believes the government is also discriminating against older persons with autism by not making treatment available to all ages and has launched a counter-appeal that has not yet been heard.

He also said the families are seeking Lovaas treatment for their children, which requires 20 to 40 hours a week of intensive one-to-one therapy costing \$45,000 to \$60,000 a year.