

## AUTISM PROGRAMS

## Province to give funds to parents

BY JEFF RUD  
Times Colonist staff

The B.C. government has quietly put the brakes on the second wave of controversial early intervention programs for pre-schoolers with autism.

The first three programs providing what has been labelled as Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention — including one at the Queen Alexandra Centre for Children's Health in Victoria — won't be affected by the change, however.

These three programs began operating this summer and are serving nearly 100 children in eight B.C. communities. About \$4.7 million annually is committed to those programs over the next three years.

But the next round of early intervention programs, for which proposals had already been received, was cancelled by the government this month. And the annual \$4.7 million targeted for that round will instead be funnelled toward individualized treatment, minister of children and family development Gordon Hogg said this week.

This means that money will go directly to families of some autistic children, who will then be able to set up their own ther-

apy programs, rather than to a centralized program such as Queen Alexandra's.

Linda Reid, minister of state for early childhood development, was in Toronto and couldn't be reached directly for comment on the change in direction.

"We're definitely in an evaluation mode in terms of the kinds of options we want to put on the table for parents," Reid said in a telephone message.

Reid said both she and Premier Gordon Campbell went into May's election wanting to foster increased parental involvement and choice for parents of children with autism.

"We hope to have those options on the table well before Christmas for those families," Reid said.

The government had targeted a total of nearly \$20 million per year toward new province-wide early intervention programs, which were actually initiated by the NDP as a response to a Supreme Court decision last year that deemed such treatment medically necessary.

Critics of the early intervention programs labelled them a fraud, however, saying they weren't scientifically based. These critics, chief among them the group Families for Early Autism Treatment of British Columbia, called for fam-

ilies to receive funding directly.

The province is addressing these concerns by switching the second phase to an individualized treatment model, said ministry spokeswoman Marisa Adair. Outcomes from both the EIBI and individualized programs will be evaluated after three years.

With \$9.4 million per year already committed for the next three years, Adair said the rest of the \$20 million originally allocated for EIBI programs is still slotted for early autism treatment. Some of the remaining funds will go to startup costs, staffing and evaluation, she said, but the rest will go to further programs.

"That money is there," Adair said. "What we are doing is implementing these programs as quickly as we can."

Families for Early Autism Treatment executive director Sabrina Freeman applauded the switch to more individualized programs but can't understand why the government is taking so long to commit all its targeted money to programs.

"We have 525 children (B.C. preschoolers with autism) waiting for treatment since July of 2000," she said.

Freeman also pointed out the government has broken two major pre-election promises it made regarding autism.

The Liberals promised to drop the provincial government appeal of the Supreme Court ruling that last year ordered the province to provide and fund "medically necessary" effective early treatment for autism, Freeman said.

Instead, the new government has continued the court case, Freeman said, extending "delaying tactics that inflict more and more horror on children whose window of opportunity for improvement is tragically small."

Attorney General Geoff Plant said this summer that the case raises much broader issues than funding for autism. At the crux, he said, was whether health care policy should be made by elected representatives or by the courts. The matter continues to be before the courts with the government appealing and the families cross-appealing.

Freeman said the Liberals also promised to transfer responsibility for autism treatment to the health ministry, where she said it belongs.

"That way, there would be funding for every single child with autism, until their pediatrician says they no longer need it," Freeman said. "Why should treatment for a child with autism be any different than treatment for a child with cancer?"