

Each of us was once a child

Progress toward creating a Bill of Health Care Rights for British Columbian children and youth

The BCMA is poised to be the first provincial medical association to develop a Bill of Health Care Rights for Children and Youth. The Child and Youth Health Committee first introduced the concept to the Council of Health Promotion in 2005. Working with partners including the UBC Department of Pediatrics, the BC Pediatric Society, and the International Association of Child Rights and Development, the BCMA has drafted a bill for wider discussion.

Understanding the health needs of children and youth is important to hospitals, children-serving organizations and agencies, and doctors and other health professionals. Government, health authorities, and boards of directors need a child-oriented filter with which to examine governance responsibilities and appropriately allocate resources.

This bill builds on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child at the community level, and complements the proposed Charter of Child and Youth Health introduced at the Child Health Summit in April by the Canadian Medical Association, the Canadian Paediatric Society, and the College of Family Physicians. The Charter commits that Canadian children and youth “have access to a safe and secure environment; opportunity for optimal health and development; and access to a full range of health services and resources.” It addresses deaths from unintentional injuries, infant mortality rates, obesity, immunization, Aboriginal health, mental illness, and determinants of health.

The intent behind the BC Bill of Health Care Rights is to focus attention on the needs of children and youth

within health policy, planning, and provision. It will serve as a guide for a common standard for government, health authorities, hospitals, educators, health care professionals, communities, social agencies, parents, and other providers.

The consequences of failing to rise to the challenge of providing adequate health care to these children are profound.

Skills, knowledge, expertise, and resources needed to support and nurture children who do not have a strong family environment should be provided on a consistent basis across the province. It is important as a society to understand and learn from past mistakes.

The need for a standard of care for children and youth is especially important for the Ministry of Child and Family Development, which is responsible for child protection. A Bill of Health Care Rights for Children and Youth will assist Ms Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, BC’s new Children’s Representative. The bill will provide a level playing field for children and youth who must depend on services directed and provided by government. The consequences of failing to rise to the challenge of providing adequate health care to these children are profound.

Adults are deeply affected by their childhoods. Many chronic diseases originate in childhood, and lifelong disabilities may be prevented with good perinatal and pediatric care. Issues of growth and development influence later mental health and intellectual capacity. Health care provisions built on an understanding of children and youth can avoid or lessen many of these problems.

In the July/August 2005 issue of the *BCMJ*, the Child and Youth Health Committee stated, “Children are often pushed to the back of the line,” and this year the BCMA passed the following resolution: “The BCMA calls on the Ministry of Health to enable the creation of a BC bill of rights for children and youth as it relates to their health care needs.”

The next step is to engage providers, regulatory and professional bodies, and parents and youth in a collaborative workshop. A finished document is expected to be ready for presentation to the BCMA Board by April, 2008, in preparation for the BCMA AGM, followed closely by the AGM of the Canadian Paediatric Society in Victoria next June.

The year 2008 marks 150 years since British Columbia became a colony. What better way to demonstrate the importance of children in the development and future of British Columbia as “the best place on earth” than to proclaim a bill that protects the health and rights of children in this province. After all, each of us was once a child!

—Basil Boulton, MD
Chair, Child and Youth Health
Committee