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August 10, 2004

**The Honourable Pierre Pettigrew**  
**Minister of Health**  
**Minister's Office - Health Canada**  
Brooke Claxton Bldg., Tunney's Pasture  
P.L. 0906C  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0K9

Dear Minister Pettigrew,

The Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) represents the interests of more than 3,000 community and public health practitioners across Ontario. The mission of OPHA is to provide leadership on issues affecting the public's health, and to strengthen the impact of people who are active in public and community health throughout Ontario.

The Breastfeeding Promotion Workgroup of the OPHA focuses on promotion, support and advocacy for breastfeeding. One of the objectives of this working group is to identify partners with whom we may work collaboratively to improve breastfeeding initiation and duration rates in the province of Ontario. Clearly, Health Canada is a key partner in our mission to positively impact maternal and child health outcomes.

Current research offers compelling evidence that breastfeeding improves health outcomes across the lifespan, significantly reducing health care costs. Since costs to the health care system place a considerable financial burden on all of society, we must work together to bring the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding to the fore of the public health agenda.

Provincial governments have guidelines which encourage the promotion and support of breastfeeding through a variety of activities, however, most provinces do not have a provincial breastfeeding policy, nor is there provincial funding directed specifically at the achievement of the objectives related to breastfeeding. As a result, in the absence of a federal breastfeeding policy and funding to support it, the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding across Canada is, at best, inconsistent.

Historically, Health Canada has provided leadership related to the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding. An example of this leadership would be the development and implementation of the *Breastfeeding Friendly Places: Anytime, Anywhere* national campaign strategy. In addition, Health Canada has developed and distributed a variety of breastfeeding promotional materials which breastfeeding organizations, health professionals and child health advocates have relied upon to support their work. Unfortunately, these promotional materials are no longer available from Health Canada, there are no plans in place for a federal campaign promoting breastfeeding, nor is there financial support directed specifically toward the implementation of strategies to enhance the initiation and duration rates of breastfeeding in our country.

It is of concern that breastfeeding duration rates in Canada are well below the World Health Organization recommendation, and that initiation and duration are lower among younger women, single women, women who smoke and women with lower levels of income and education. The children of these women are already at increased risk of poor health outcomes, therefore, we must continue to develop and implement comprehensive strategies to improve breastfeeding initiation and duration in order to enable our most vulnerable citizens to have the best possible start in life.

The Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program is a good example of federal/provincial collaboration in the promotion and support of breastfeeding, and demonstrates how we can work together to achieve greater health for Canadians, particularly those at greatest risk of poor health outcomes. We certainly hope this program will continue to be included as one component of a national breastfeeding strategy. It is interesting to note that an astounding 99% of Norwegian mothers breastfeed their newborns, and, six months later, 80% are still breastfeeding. These amazing success rates can be attributed to government funding which encouraged the establishment of baby-friendly practices, extended maternity benefits which support breastfeeding mothers, and workplace policies which enable women to nurse their babies to two years or beyond, as per the recommendation of the World Health Organization and other breastfeeding experts worldwide.

The Norwegian example provides an excellent model for Canada. What we need now is the political leadership, including legislation, to uphold the provisions of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, and adequate funding to enable the promotion and support of breastfeeding nationwide.

To achieve improved maternal and child health, and optimize use of resources in Canada, we propose that Health Canada consider the following policy goals and objectives, which emerged from the National Breastfeeding Policy Conference in Washington, DC, in 1998:

- appoint a national breastfeeding coordinator of appropriate authority
- establish a national breastfeeding committee comprised of relevant multi-sectoral governmental, non-governmental and private voluntary organizations and health organizations
- enact into law the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, and monitor compliance
- address the relationship between women's and children's health and breastfeeding (including breastmilk exclusivity) through regular surveillance and monitoring
- guarantee the right to breastfeed within the workplace

- integrate system-wide coordination of evidence-based standards of best practices across the health care system
- frame breastfeeding within the context of public health, health promotion and disease prevention
- develop and implement an ongoing national, comprehensive, coordinated marketing program
- create a non-profit fundraising organization whose resources would be available as grants for programs which support and promote breastfeeding

In order to reduce inequities and improve the health and well-being of Canadians, we need to have a strategic plan related to breastfeeding, which must include the development and implementation of national policies. The World Health Organization Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child feeding (2003) provides a clear framework for governments to improve maternal and child health outcomes by taking action to promote, protect and support breastfeeding.

With effective political leadership, collaboration between government, the private sector and voluntary organizations, and the development of evidence-based policies, Canada will join the countries leading the world in the protection, promotion, and support of breastfeeding!

We look forward to your written response.

Sincerely,

Dr. Peter Wiebe  
President

P.S. The current United States Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign is the largest government-sponsored advertising promotion of its kind! To learn more about the campaign, log on to <http://www.4woman.gov/Breastfeeding/index.htm>