

700 Lawrence Ave. W., Suite 310
Toronto, Ontario M6A 3B4

Tel: (416) 367-3313
1-800-267-6817 (Ont)
Fax: (416) 367-2844
E-mail: info@opha.on.ca
www.opha.on.ca

Honorary Patron
The Hon. David C. Onley
Lieutenant Governor of Ontario

President
Carol Timmings
E-mail: ctimmings@opha.on.ca

Executive Director
Connie Uetrecht
E-mail: cuetrecht@opha.on.ca

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March 10, 2004

**To: Honourable George Smitherman
Minister of Health and Long-Term Care**
10th Flr, Hepburn Block
80 Grosvenor St
Toronto ON M7A 2C4

Dear Minister:

I am writing to make suggestions to you respecting the health of infants. By way of background, we feel that most public health programs in the province are losing ground because the funding associated with them is not directly related to demographics and is not adjusted to reflect inflationary factors. In the medium and long term, this will only increase costs in hospitals and other treatment centres and for that reason the Ontario Public Health Association has separately recommended to you that funding for core public health programs be stabilized with a limited injection of funding to offset inflationary and demographic factors.

One of the areas where the gradual erosion of funding is having the greatest negative impact involves support to mothers who are starting to breastfeed a baby or who are already nursing their infants but experiencing difficulties in doing so. At present the Healthy Babies- Healthy Children Program currently provides funds for one postpartum home visit for low risk families. Although this is a good beginning, this is not sufficient to accommodate a family experiencing a breastfeeding crisis. The literature suggests that visits by public health nurses are extremely helpful to these mothers and infants and that many medical issues which involve physician or hospital visits can be avoided if public health nurses can devote the time needed to work with mothers and their infants. Infants who are formula fed, for example, have a 70% increase in their risk of ear infections compared with infants who are breast fed and our information is that it costs well in excess of \$1,000 to treat each case of ear infection in a child under two. The benefits of successfully reducing the incidence of infant ear-aches spill over to the entire family, as anyone who has tried to calm an infant with this problem in the middle of the night can testify.

In short, we would like you to pursue the stabilization recommendation we have made and I have raised this particular issue with you to indicate the pressing necessity of doing so. Beyond the immediate problem, however, there is some evidence that Ontario is falling behind some other provinces in some measures of breastfeeding success. Our breastfeeding working group is considering these broader issues and I expect we will have further suggestions to make on this most basic of public health issues in future. In the meantime, we would very much welcome anything you can do to address the immediate funding challenges public health departments face, particularly by stabilizing and hopefully increasing the amount of time public health nurses can spend with new mothers.

Yours truly,

David MacKinnon
Executive Director

c.c. Marie Bountrogianni, Minister of Children's Services, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration

Dr. Sheela Basrur, Chief Medical Officer of Health
Helga Loechel, Director, Early Years And Healthy Child Development Branch
Carol Timmings, ANDSOOHA - Public Health Nursing Management
Doris Grinspun, RAO Executive Director
Peter Wiebe, OPHA President
Garry Aslanyan, OPHA Vice-President
Connie Uetrecht, OPHA Past President

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