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OPHA was asked and agreed to support the following Open Letter to

The Honorable Anne McLellan
Minister of Health
Minister's Office - Health Canada

The Honourable Jane Purves
Minister of Health
Province of Nova Scotia

In early February F/P/T First Ministers met to consider the Senate and Romanow reports. As a result a new health accord was reached that increased federal transfers to the provinces (by \$34.6 billion over 5 years). It was also agreed that a National Health Council would be established by May 5, 2003, to "monitor and make annual public reports on the implementation of the accord, particularly its accountability and transparency provisions". The F/P/T First Ministers charged Health Ministers with establishing this Council and you carry that accountability.

You have now announced that the creation of a Council is now to be delayed till the end of May because of the SARS crisis. Although you assure us that the establishment of a Council is proceeding well, there is a growing concern in the health policy world that this is far from the case.

Disquieting rumours emanating from closed-door discussions by F/P/T "officials" include that the National Health Council is to "sunset" in five years - to be a temporary body only. We hear that it is to have no capacity of independence. That it will be entirely dependent on existing provincial/territorial and federal bureaucracies for data and information and that its reports to the public will be under the aegis of the F/P/T Ministers or Deputy Ministers of Health.

If true, why bother? As Mr. Romanow pointed out, the machinery of intergovernmental relations is cumbersome now, made so in part by a "dizzying array" of behind-the-scenes groups and other bodies. Do we need yet another?

The Health Council recommended by Mr. Romanow was not to be

simply another body in this bewildering web of committees and expert panels. It was intended to be "a new way of doing business", reporting openly each year to Canadians on how well our health care system performs across the country. In short, the vision for a National Council is that it will provide better leadership and more direct accountability for the well over \$100 billion we spend each year publicly (about 70% of the total) and out-of-pocket for health care.

We fear the National Health Council about which we will hear shortly may be a very pale shadow of those conceived by Mr. Romanow and by the Senate Committee. And as such there is the very real risk that the new billions being poured into health care will do nothing more than shore up the status quo and will not, as Mr Romanow pleaded, result in real change to the system.

Of course, nobody wants yet another ineffectual Committee cluttering up government decision-making. We don't need a 'new bureaucracy' but an 'anti bureaucracy', a body capable of cutting through the cloud of political obscurantism which surrounds our federal provincial transfers on health care these days.

A group of experts and opinion leaders met at the University of Toronto in mid-March to provide advice on how to make the National Health Council as effective as possible. The strong consensus was that it was essential that the Council be made of widely respected individuals, known for their personal integrity, selected on the basis of their knowledge, expertise, and experience and not because they represented any profession or constituency, who would contribute to the public perception of the Council as a body genuinely at arms-length from governments and their bureaucracies. It was considered vital that the Council be seen to be a) as independent as possible within the limits of the reporting relationship to the F/P/T Ministers of Health decreed by the First Ministers and b) that its processes be open and transparent; and c) that it have the capacity to obtain information from all sources and an in-house research capacity.

Delaying the establishment of the Council till the end of May could be a blessing in disguise. There may be time now to ensure that any Health Council created is more than a toothless tabby.

Federal, Provincial and Territorial First Ministers promised Canadians in February an opportunity provide them with a voice in the governance of health care through establishing a National Health Council. All of us concerned with the preservation and enhancement of health care in Canada ask you to ensure that this opportunity to create a real and effective National Health Council not be lost.