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January 21, 2002

**To: The Honourable Michael Harris
Premier**

Dear Honourable Michael Harris:

In anticipation of the upcoming Provincial-Territorial Premiers' Meeting, the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) is writing you to highlight what we believe is a fundamental association between the future of the health care system and the health and well-being of Canadians. As of partner of both Campaign 2000 and Ontario's Promise, we are highlighting this relationship for children.

The OPHA has as its mission to strengthen the impact of people who are active in community and public health throughout Ontario. Through its membership OPHA addresses the broad and complex health and social issues facing the citizens, families, neighbourhoods and communities of Ontario.

The activities of OPHA and its members, which are directed at disease prevention, health promotion and protection, are focused on the determinants of health. This broader approach recognizes the complex nature of health and disease. These determinants must be considered in any discussion and planning for a public health care system in Canada. Investments in preventive measures and health promotion are essential strategies that should be an integral part of Canada's health system. Income is recognized as a key determinant of health and so the persistence of child poverty compromises the development of our younger generation and requires decisive leadership in the development and funding of successful programs aimed at ensuring the well-being of children.

A collective commitment to the health and well-being of children and families will require a shift in public policy priorities. The recent public policy focus has not been successful in substantially reducing child and family poverty and has resulted in a reduced capacity to make social investments. All senior levels of government must demonstrate their willingness to collaborate and significantly increase investments in a comprehensive plan for children that will promote a healthy, inclusive society and assist in providing an enhanced social and economic environment. In addition to a publicly funded and administered, universal health care system, these social investments are essential to enabling children in Canada to get the best possible start and to have an equal opportunity to succeed.

The National Children's Agenda, a positive first step in government to collaboration for children, has had only a small impact in meeting the needs of families and children. Your leadership is needed in taking the next steps in the expansion of the National Children's Agenda recognizing that the health and well-being of children and their families depends on a mix of income security measure, community services, housing and labour market initiatives.

We, like the majority Canadians, remain committed to a publicly funded and administered, universal health care system that can meet the needs of all people and guarantee all children will have access to the same level and quality of health services. Discussions on the future of the health care system in Canada must acknowledge that the privatization of services will have fundamental implications towards further eroding access to needed services, especially among the more disadvantaged.

We urge you to consider the impact of addressing the social determinants of health in terms of how such investments will contribute to the long-term sustainability of Canada's health care system. Ample research shows that a healthy start in life has a long-term impact on the well-being of children. Children who live in poverty encounter more hurdles to healthy development and are at elevated risk for a wide range of negative outcomes to their health and well-being. Research by the Canadian Council on Social Development, the Canadian Institute of Child Health and others shows that poor children are more likely to experience a host of negative outcomes including higher rates of disability, mental health problems, and lower levels of educational attainment. They are also less likely to live in a safe neighbourhood and are at a disproportionate risk of exposure to environmental contaminants. Further, studies among pregnant women at risk for low birth weight due to factors such as poverty, have demonstrated that low cost interventions on the order of \$100 per woman can significantly reduce the incidence of low weight births. Each low weight birth results in the savings of over \$600,000 in medical and hospital costs per individual over the cost of a lifetime.

The Provincial/territorial Ministers of Health acknowledged the importance of preventive measures during their September 2001 annual meeting where they stated "the promotion of health and the prevention of illness are keys to the long-term sustainability of our publicly funded health system." The point was also made during the September 2001 annual meeting where they stated "the promotion of health and the prevention of illness are keys to the long-term sustainability of our publicly funded health system." The point was also made during the September 2000 First Ministers' meeting, where Ministers "committed to strengthening their investments and commitments in (the area of health promotion and wellness), including the development of strategies and policies that recognize the determinants of health, enhance disease prevention and promote public health."

The theme of the 52nd annual OPHA general meeting held in November, 2001 was "Harvesting Health: Embracing Tradition and Change." We urge the premiers to include this theme in your deliberations. Embrace the tradition of the principles of the Canada Health Act and embrace the change afforded by health promotion and disease prevention when based upon the determinants of health.

We urge you to use your upcoming meeting to address the fundamental relationship between the well-being of children and the future of Canada's health care system and to ensure the success of the National children's Agenda. We wish you success in your upcoming meetings and look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Jack Lee
Executive Director (Acting)

c.c. Mr. Dalton McGuinty
Mr. Howard Hampton