

Dr. Gary Bloch  
4<sup>th</sup> floor, 410 Sherbourne St.  
Toronto, Ontario, M4X 1K2  
[gary.bloch@utoronto.ca](mailto:gary.bloch@utoronto.ca)

Dr. Suzanne Strasberg  
President, Ontario Medical Association  
150 Bloor St. W.  
Toronto, Ontario, M5S 3C1  
By Email only: [Suzanne\\_Strasberg@OMA.org](mailto:Suzanne_Strasberg@OMA.org)

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Dear Dr. Strasberg:

I am writing with an issue that should be of immediate concern to the OMA. The Ministry of Community and Social Services has issued a directive that allows front line social services workers to invalidate the medical opinions of physicians, as presented on applications for the Special Diet Allowance (SDA).

As you may know, the SDA is available to social assistance recipients who qualify for an income supplement by virtue of having one or more of the health conditions listed on the SDA application form. In order to access the SDA, a form must be completed for each social assistance recipient by a physician, nurse practitioner, dietician, or midwife (for pregnancy-related conditions). This process requires the health provider to initial each authorized condition, and to sign and date the form. The form was developed in conjunction with the OMA Forms Committee, and was most recently updated in 2005 (with the approval of this Committee).

In a directive dated December 18, 2009 (copy attached), the Director of Ontario Works, Erin Hannah, instructed front line social assistance workers to reject SDA application forms in cases in which they do not believe the social assistance recipient truly has the conditions certified on the form. In a letter to John Clarke of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, dated January 22, 2010 (copy attached), the General Manager of Employment and Social Services for the City of Toronto, Heather MacVicar, confirmed that the City of Toronto is following the provincial directive.

I feel these developments are of significant concern to physicians who treat people who rely on social assistance, and should be of significant concern to the Ontario Medical Association. That a front line social assistance worker, with no medical training, could presume to question a physician's signed declaration of a patient's health condition is a direct affront to the medical authority and expertise, and professional integrity, of the physician who completed the form.

It is concerning to me, and should be concerning to the profession, that someone without medical training could question a physician's diagnosis and declaration on such a form. Even in a case of peer or judicial review of physicians' diagnoses and practice, a comprehensive review of that physician's assessments and practice, and often a direct reassessment of the patient, is

undertaken, by peers, before an assessment is made as to the validity of that physician's assessment.

Of note, Ms. Hannah's directive also instructs front line workers to consider the length of a social assistance recipient's relationship with the signing provider. Given the number of people who do not have a regular family physician in Ontario, and the inequity in access to health care for people living in poverty, this would seem to be an unnecessary and unfair restriction on the ability for social assistance recipients to access the SDA. Furthermore, this again allows untrained front line workers to place judgement on the abilities and integrity of the signing physician.

Finally, social assistance workers are counselled to refer forms they consider fraudulent to an "Eligibility Review Officer", and possibly to the police. I am concerned that physicians may feel they could be at risk of police investigation, again without any clear process of peer review or comprehensive evaluation of their completion of the form in question. Such a threat may place physicians under a state of fear in their attempts to meet the health needs of their patients living in poverty. The end result of such a situation is likely to be a decrease in the prescription of appropriate income supplements for health needs to those who most need them.

I would be happy to discuss this further with you, or with the appropriate authority within the OMA.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'G. Bloch', with a stylized, cursive script.

Gary Bloch MD CCFP  
Staff Physician, St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto  
Assistant Professor, University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine