

September 8, 2005

Honourable Sandra Pupatello
Minister of Community and Social Services
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Dear Minister Pupatello:

We are a group of health care providers and professionals from across Ontario who care, collectively, for thousands of the poorest Ontarians. We are writing to express our concern about the health effects of the poverty in which many of our patients live. As you know, welfare rates in Ontario were cut drastically in 1995, and have fallen steadily relative to their spending power in the ten years since. This has left our patients who live on social assistance without enough money to pay for even their most basic needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing. We believe this constitutes a health crisis.

The link between poverty and ill health is supported by strong evidence. We know that people who live in poverty are at significantly higher risk for developing, and dying from, illnesses such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. Given the strength of this evidence, we believe it is our professional obligation and ethical responsibility to address poverty as a risk factor for ill health.

You may have heard of the current initiative by health care providers to approve the special diet supplement for all welfare recipients. As poverty is one of the strongest risk factors for serious illness, it constitutes a legitimate, and preventable, "medical condition", justifying the prescription of the full supplement to every person on social assistance. We now have experience with thousands of our patients who have received this supplement, and who report a powerful impact on their, and their families', ability to meet their nutritional and health needs.

We do not believe this effort should ultimately have to be carried forward by health care providers, however. The issue of poverty can and should be addressed in the legislature, not in our offices. Welfare rates have fallen by a third or more in spending power over the past ten years. These rates now place most recipients' income at less than half the poverty line. According to Toronto Public Health, a single person living on welfare is \$285 per month short of being able to afford the recommendations for a nutritious diet contained in Ontario's Nutritious Food Basket. Welfare rates in Ontario must be raised across the board, to show that our government, and our society, is not willing to allow our poorest neighbours to continue to live at high risk of ill health.

We are writing to enlist your support in improving the health of our province's poorest families, by working to increase welfare rates to a level that meets their basic needs.

We would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to discuss our concerns, and to discuss how we can work together to address this crisis. Please contact us through Dr. Gary Bloch at gary.bloch@utoronto.ca.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter,

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cc: Hon. George Smitherman, Minister of Health and Long Term Care

Hon. Jim Watson, Minister of Health Promotion

Dr. Sheela Basrur, Chief Medical Officer of Health

Michael Prue, NDP Critic Community and Social Services

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Shelley Martel, NDP Critic, Health and Long Term Care

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