



Caring for Canada's children

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Canada has the potential—and the ability—to be the number one place in the world for a child to live and grow up.

Dr K. Kellie Leitch¹

Canadians should consider it a national disgrace that of 29 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, Canada ranks only 21st in child well-being, including mental health, 22nd in preventable childhood injuries and deaths, youth suicide, and child poverty, and 27th in childhood obesity. These facts propelled the development of the Child Health Initiative, a collaborative of more than 100 child health advocacy groups led by the Canadian Medical Association, the Canadian Paediatric Society, and the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC), which in 2007 introduced Canada's Charter for Child and Youth Health. The initiative recommended that a series of essential actions be taken immediately to reverse this unacceptable situation.

Healthy advice

Federal Health Minister Tony Clement, to his credit, announced the appointment of Dr K. Kellie Leitch, Chair of the Department of Pediatric Surgery at the University of Western Ontario in London, as his Advisor on Healthy Children and Youth. On March 27, 2008, after meeting with more than 750 people and reviewing more than 500 documents, Dr Leitch released her report, *Reaching for the Top*, which outlines in detail the challenges faced in securing the good health and well-being of our children¹. The report includes 95 recommendations to guide the federal government in implementing a plan to improve the health and wellness of Canada's children. This goal is vital to our youth individually and to our nation collectively.

The report emphasizes the importance of each recommendation and the value in setting benchmarks to measure ongoing outcomes. The needs of all children are addressed, with special attention to those in aboriginal groups or other populations facing specific challenges.

Some of the key recommendations in the report are the following:

- Develop and implement a national injury prevention strategy for children and youth, which would include support for helmet use, booster seats, and other protective equipment, and the elimination of toxic toys.

- Help reduce childhood obesity by creating better after-school and physical activity programs, and banning junk food advertisements that target children younger than 12.
- Improve mental health services; although 80% of all psychiatric illnesses emerge in adolescence, only 1 in 5 Canadian children who need mental health services actually receive them. Surveys of family physicians in Canada repeatedly affirm that the need for these services is a priority.
- Establish a longitudinal cohort study to track the health outcomes of children and youth in all parts of Canada.
- Establish a national office for child and youth health, with a permanent advisor. Although Dr Leitch has suggested that the office report to the Minister of Health, others, including the CFPC, support the Canadian Paediatric Society's call for a more independent federal commissioner for children and youth.

Challenges worth facing

The Chair of the Child Health Initiative, Dr Ruth Collins-Nakai, emphasized that Canada should aim to be in the top 5 for all indicators within 5 years. The CFPC, as part of the initiative, supports this goal.

To date, however, other than supposedly sending Dr Leitch's report in multiple directions for cost and other analyses, and publicly touting some of the programs government already supports, the response from Minister Clement and the federal government has not inspired much confidence. As we all too frequently hear, the government has reminded us that much of the responsibility for overseeing and delivering health programs like these rests with the individual provinces. The ongoing federal-provincial battles over jurisdiction, which have led to increasing decentralization of the federal role in health care (and a few other essential areas), has been accompanied by the loss of true national standards. As such, there has been a progressive deterioration of our health care system, which should be cause for alarm for anyone who hopes that Canada will have the kind of secure future that, at one time, so many envisioned. There is no population more closely tied to our nation's future than our children.

Reference

1. Leitch KK. *Reaching for the top: a report by the advisor on healthy children and youth*. Ottawa, ON: Health Canada; 2007. Available from: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/pubs/child-enfant/advisor-conseillere/index_e.html. Accessed 2008 Apr 1.

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