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Honourable Colin Gordon Hansen
Minister of Health, Province of British Columbia
1515 Blanshard Street
Victoria, B.C. V8W 3C8

RE: Cochlear Implant wait in B.C.

Dear Sir,

As a province-wide network of parents of hard of hearing children we direct your attention to a matter of urgent concern – that of inadequate pediatric cochlear implantation services in British Columbia. Children with diagnosed profound hearing loss are waiting up to 18 months for cochlear implant surgery.

Early Intervention Critical

Deaf children have delays in language and communication skills but early intervention is the single most critical factor for success. Children with hearing loss have a great potential to function as contributing members of society if they are given adequate support at a young age. The early years are critical for language development as this is when brain and sensory systems develop. Any time lost results in significant difficulties. A child waiting for a cochlear implant is deprived of sound and listening opportunities for some months or years and is therefore at risk for needing extra years of therapy; indeed, he may never “catch up.”

The alternative route for parents is to choose sign language communication for their deaf child. But according to a recent survey, all parents in B.C. with a deaf infant are interested in pursuing a cochlear implant. The latest research shows that with adequate therapy, children with cochlear implants will learn to listen and speak and require minimal services as they get older.

Recently published studies report that on average, deaf children using cochlear implants achieve one year of language progress in one year's time. Without cochlear implants, on average, deaf children achieve about six months of language growth in one year's time. This demonstrates both the effect of cochlear implantation on development as well as the urgency to implant children at a young age.

Cost Benefit Analysis

In the short term, the Ministry of Health saves the cost of a surgical procedure when limiting the number of children receiving implants. Educational costs for a pre-school deaf child may be approximately the same in any case – either for cochlear implant rehabilitation or deaf sign language services. Over the long term, however, there is a huge saving for children using cochlear implants over sign language in costs of special education, interpreting services, etc. Studies show that pediatric cochlear implantation is highly cost-effective. In a time of fiscal restraint this should be seen as a wise long-term investment rather than an expense.

According to the Canadian Association for the Deaf, 80 percent of their members are unemployed, or severely under-employed and 65 percent are functionally illiterate. With cochlear implantation this will change dramatically. Will British Columbian children continue to be deprived of this life-changing early intervention?

Other Provinces

A comparison of three provinces shows that B.C. is doing far fewer procedures than Alberta and Ontario (see attached chart.) These figures tell us that other provinces are quicker to act on the positive results of thousands of children around the world who have received a cochlear implant.

Several B.C. families have travelled to Ontario to have their children's cochlear implant surgery performed as timely service was not available in BC. These families have been happy with the service at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children but such major travel should not be necessary for a procedure that can be successfully done at BC Children's Hospital. It creates inequality, as parents who can afford to travel to Toronto can get the surgery there, paid for by the B.C. government, whereas children of parents who cannot afford to go to Toronto are put on a waiting list.

Parents concerned

We have found that some parents are reluctant to speak out about the troublesome waits because they fear their advocacy may further jeopardize their "place in line." Other families do not use English as their first language and some are not clear on the implications of delay.

A number of our members have children using a cochlear implant and are amazed at the difference this technology has made in the lives of their children. They are dismayed that others are being denied timely intervention.

Executive members of CHHA – B.C. Parents' Branch would be pleased to provide further information and/or documentation on this important issue. We are available to meet with Ministry representatives to discuss the needs and potential of children with hearing loss in British Columbia.

The wait for cochlear implantation has tragic life-long implications. We look forward to your immediate attention to this important matter.

Respectfully submitted,

Teresa Kazemir
President

Leila Lolua
Vice President

Janet Les
Treasurer

cc: Rebecca Harvey, Ministry of Health
B.C. Members of the Legislative Assembly
Sharon Tooe & Sandra Bressler, B.C. Children's Hospital