

HEALTH CARE

Alberta pays for treatment rejected in B.C.

■ **MLA takes local family's campaign for funding for autism treatment to B.C. legislature**

By MAURICE SMITH
Penticton Herald

Victoria may claim to be preserving health care while Alberta slashes its health budget, but for a Penticton mom, it's plain there is an Alberta advantage when it comes to the latest in autism treatment.

Barbara Rodrigues is embroiled in a battle with the province over funding for her five-year-old autistic son, Jeremy. The Ministry of Health cut funding for Jeremy when it learned the money was paying for the Lovaas therapy program, the only program parents Barbara and Joe Rodrigues say has benefited their son.

They say the province is turning a blind eye to other parents in B.C. who continue to receive special needs assistance after changing to the Lovaas program.

"I think they are scared of setting a precedent with me," said Barbara Rodrigues.

She became a familiar sight when she carried a sign outside local government offices to protest the cut to funding. After more than 100 days of picketing, she was forced to quit recently to spend more time aiding in therapy after the family was forced to lay off one of their therapists.

Okanagan-Penticton MLA Rick Thorpe took the matter to the legislature last week. In an exchange with Lois Boone, minister for children and families, Thorpe challenged the minister on a recently released autism action plan before asking specifically about the Rodrigues case.

Thorpe noted that while the province cut off the \$1,000 to \$1,200 a month in funding for the Rodrigues' when it learned the money was going to Lovaas, it is offering \$1,600 a month for specialized child care.

"Can the minister tell me that spending \$1,600 a month and having a child in day care is a better option for that child than \$1,000 or \$1,200 a month and the community helping

out with Lovaas ... ? Can you tell me how that's in the best interest of the child?"

Boone responded Lovaas is just one of many treatment options available and that a decision would not be based on one case but would be a provincewide one.

Thorpe went on to compare B.C. to Alberta. "This government rails at the Alberta government, because they don't look after people. But who pays for Lovaas in Canada? Alberta does. And this family was thinking of moving to Alberta so they could look after their child. That is a crime to have to happen here in British Columbia."

That is not entirely accurate, said a spokesman for the Alberta Ministry of Health and Wellness. David Bray said there is no blanket coverage, but under a pilot project some families do receive funding.

He said Lovaas is considered to be "expensive and labour intensive," and is still being reviewed in Alberta.

"There is a pilot project through the Children's Services department to assess its viability, but they haven't come to any conclusions yet. There are some people who have been able to get funding for it after they have been turned down and gone through an appeal process."

While the Rodrigueses say all they want is a renewal of the previous funding level, they believe the province is reluctant because other parents might then demand the full cost.

Indeed, Boone's reply to Thorpe suggests she is concerned about funding the entire cost.

"Lovaas treatment is estimated to cost between \$40,000 and \$60,000 per year. If we were to do that for every child, then it would be about \$43.2 million," said Boone. "Those are decisions, as I said, that the ministry has not yet chosen to make. We will be looking at bringing in an array of services. Lovaas may be one of them; there may be others as well."

Rodrigues points out intensive Lovaas treatment is generally only required for approximately two years, after which it is scaled back or in many cases ceases altogether and the symptoms disappear. And she points out the costs are recovered many times over during the rest of that child's life when symptoms are reduced or eliminated.

Alberta government has come through

Dear Editor,

It is important to correct an error that appeared in your June 22 article, "Alberta pays for treatment, rejected in B.C."

David Bray, spokesman for the Alberta Ministry of Health and Wellness said a statement by Okanagan-Penticton MLA Rick Thorpe in the B.C. Legislature that Alberta pays for Lovaas autism treatment is not correct. The Alberta Ministry of Health spokesman went on to say, "under a pilot project [only] some families receive funding" for autism treatment.

In fact, Rick Thorpe is 100 per cent correct. Alberta does pay for autism treatment for all families — and not because of a pilot project. The real reason is an Alberta judge (J. Deyell) forced them to pay for Lovaas autism treatment in 1996 following the case of C.R. vs. Alberta (Director of Child Welfare). A full transcript of the Alberta autism decision is on the web at www.featbc.org/featbc/Alberta.html

Regarding Lovaas autism treatment, the Alberta judge said, "The therapy is of great benefit to the child and to his family. It is addressing some fundamental issues, such as speech and aggression. The appellants have been borrowing heavily to fund the therapy. They cannot afford the expense, and the expense is the responsibility of the state."

That is clear and unambiguous language, even for politicians and bureaucrats.

*Isaac Tamir,
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