

Hello and welcome. My name is Brenda Deskin and I thank you for being here this morning. I am accompanied by a group of very special people who are here today to raise their voices on behalf of those who cannot. May I introduce you to...Norah Whitney, fellow parent of a child with autism; Senator Jim Munson, who before his life in politics was an accomplished and well-known Canadian journalist, and Canada's own Eugene Levy, illustrious actor, writer and director. We are all here today to call on our country's federal government to finally act to end the discrimination of approximately 200,000 Canadians living with autism by including their health care under Medicare.

In Canada, where we're celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the 40th anniversary of supposedly universal access to medical care – Canadians affected with autism are still shut-out, orphans of Medicare – UNBELIEVABLE!

Make no mistake – autism is a disease – it is classified as such by the World Health Organization in its publication, the International Classification of Diseases. The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia now report one in every 150 North American children and one in every 94 boys is being diagnosed....this is a health care epidemic of truly staggering proportions....and one which our federal government can no longer ignore by denying access to treatment....

Treatment which has been recognized by both the scientific community and the courts as “medically necessary” – ABA or applied behaviour analysis or IBI, Intensive Behavioural Intervention. Autism treatment is a core health need, and must be covered by Medicare, in the same way that heart disease, HIV/AIDS, cancer and any number of other conditions are covered. So why is autism treatment not available to all people with autism in a country that boasts universal health care? We've been given reasons....everything from jurisdictional issues to costs to creating a constitutional crisis....all poor excuses....which are no longer acceptable...

What have North American governments been doing about this emerging social disaster?....Last year, the US Congress unanimously approved the allocation of \$945 million in funding the “Combating Autism Bill”....earlier this year, the US Senate saw the introduction of a bill that will pour a further \$350 million into the fight for an end to autism....What about the Canadian government? Well, it's going to create a web-site and a “national awareness strategy”....our Minister of Health wants to hold a symposium of “stake-holders”....but not anytime soon...it was to be held in mid-June but now has been postponed indefinitely....

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Canadian families are suffering needlessly – some are moving to Alberta where funding is available, many are cashing in their RRSPs, taking on second and third mortgages and even losing their homes to get treatment for their children. But even this money runs out because as is the case for cancer care or heart surgery, treatment doesn't come cheap...but treatment is much cheaper than doing nothing.... A recent Harvard University study shows that Canada spends 3.5 billion dollars per year on autism...that's 3.5 billion to warehouse, baby-sit, maintain, institutionalize....the financial cost of not treating is staggering...the emotional cost in human suffering cannot be measured....So – what happens without ABA therapy? The heartbreaking reality is that most will end up in institutions by the time they reach adolescence....or worse....I am sure many of you remember the tragic story of Randy Mogridge, a 46-year old autistic man who wandered off from his Oakville, Ontario residence three years ago to be found dead at the bottom of a nearby creek two weeks later. Sadly, we hear more and more of these stories from all over Canada.

Our son, like thousands of others, has and continues to benefit from ABA therapy. His progress has been hard and slow, but this treatment has given him access to the things that every other Canadian kid has access to....more importantly...it is giving him the opportunity to be the best he can be....and life with dignity....and yes, just like someone on dialysis, he will need treatment for the rest of his life....that is his right as a Canadian. Shouldn't everyone in our country be given this opportunity? Fair-minded Canadians said YES when polled by Ipsos-Reid in November, 2004. 89% said autism treatment should be covered by Medicare.

Our family, along with others in BC and Ontario have cumulatively spent over twenty agonizing years in the courts trying to get health care, a basic human right for our children. After major victories in the Supreme Courts of BC and the Superior Court of Ontario, the Supreme Court of Canada, bizarrely, “washed their hands” of our children and said it wasn’t up to them to decide who should get health care in Canada, it’s up to parliament and legislatures...they told us to “get political.”

Parents across Canada have heard that message and are organizing to ensure MPs who will publicly commit to amending the Canada Health Act to include autism treatment under Medicare are elected in the next federal election....in the meantime....this is an issue whose time has come....and we expect our federal government to create a National Autism Strategy which will include:

ABA/IBI autism treatment be covered under Medicare so that everyone with autism – regardless of age or where they live - has access to effective, science-based treatment.

Provide funding for the creation of academic chairs and departments of Applied Behaviour Analysis in our universities

Establish federal/provincial systems for licensing, registering and certifying professional ABA.....

The glacial pace of bureaucratic time in Ottawa continues, while tens of thousands of Canadian children and their families suffer needlessly...We are a wealthy society...the courts have ruled that the treatment of autism is a core health need...and that effective, science-based treatment exists...The only thing standing in the way of an end to this injustice is a lack of political will.

I now direct your attention to Senator Jim Munson who has been nothing short of awe-inspiring in terms of his advocacy efforts on behalf of people with autism in Canada. As a journalist, Senator Munson reported news for close to thirty years, more recently as a television correspondent for the CTV network. In fact, he has been nominated twice for a Gemini award in recognition of his accomplishments throughout his journalism career. He was appointed to the Senate of Canada after serving as the Director of Communications in the office of the Prime Minister of Canada. He has already been instrumental in drawing federal attention to our Nation’s autism crisis as a member of The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology which in March of 2007 released a Final Report on The Enquiry on the Funding for the Treatment of Autism entitled “Pay Now Or Pay Later – Autism Families In Crisis”. It is my honour to present to you Senator Jim Munson.

Thank-you, Senator Munson, for your motivating and heartfelt message. Before we continue, I would like to just mention that Andrew Kavchak, whom Senator Munson mentioned, is very much a part of this initiative. He unfortunately could not make the trip from Ottawa to be here today but I can assure you that you will continue hearing from and about Andrew as we press onward in our pursuits. I now turn your attention to a fellow parent of a child with autism, Norrah Whitney. Norrah and I have known each other as long as we have known autism and have faced many hurdles together. Norrah is truly an inspiration not only to me, but to countless other parents of children with autism. I share some things today about Norrah that she would be too modest to mention herself, but she single-handedly founded the Ontario chapter of FEAT, Families for Early Autism Treatment, and remains today as its volunteer Executive Director. Norrah

has been extremely instrumental as a human rights advocate in Ontario, spearheading an initiative that saw an unprecedented 121 autism-related complaints before the Ontario Human Rights Commission. As the first case to be heard, Norrah then held workshops for other parents who wanted to launch similar actions but couldn't afford lawyers to represent them. I think that one of the reasons that autism advocacy has been so difficult for many parents and families is because at the end of the day, they are simply too stressed, too busy and too exhausted to be able to do anything. Norrah, who I must mention, is a single parent, has always risen to the challenge, never giving up on getting treatment for her son, even when she herself was undergoing cancer treatment. Norrah is truly a survivor in so many ways and we are fortunate to have her here with us today...

Our next speaker really needs no introduction. Growing up, it was always a special treat to be able to watch him on SCTV and tell friends that I had a relative on television. Eugene Levy was born and raised in what is now my home town, Hamilton, Ontario. Eugene's career has soared over the years as an actor, director, writer and producer . Recent feature film credits include American Pie, Father of the Bride, The Man, Cheaper by the Dozen, Curious George, Over the Hedge and the list goes on and on. Eugene is the recipient of two Emmys for SCTV and a Grammy and New York Film Critic Circle award for A Mighty Wind. In 2006 he was inducted into Canada's Walk Of Fame with his name forever cemented into the sidewalk of Toronto's entertainment district. And only days ago, he hosted the 2007 Canada Walk of Fame Event at Toronto's Hummingbird Centre with the celebration culminating in a television tribute special that honours Canada's finest stars. We feel so fortunate to have Eugene with us today to help raise awareness about the autism crisis in Canada and the need for autism treatment to be part of Medicare. It is with the greatest of pleasure that I hand over the microphone to you, Eugene.

Thank-you, Eugene, for your powerful words. We now welcome any of your questions.