

## Eugene Levy Speech

Over the years, my family has been hit by the ravages of cancer, heart disease, muscular dystrophy, diabetes, and Alzheimer's disease. Every one of those afflictions is a worthy cause for wholehearted support. And every one of these afflictions has treatment that is covered by Medicare. The most recent affliction to hit my family is Autism. My cousin Brenda has a son Michael who has been living with this disorder since the day he was born. The treatment for autism is NOT covered by Medicare.

Before I get started, I'd like to read a condensed version of an article that appeared in the Vancouver Sun on April 26, one of many installments written by Pete McMartin about a woman named Bev Sharpe who has a daughter with Autism. I think it really personalizes all the numbers and statistics we've been hearing about today.

(ARTICLE IS READ)

While autism itself remains a mystery in terms of its cause, what is not mysterious is why we all seem to know someone who has it. The answer is simple... it's prevalence rate is skyrocketing. Today in Canada and the US, one out of every 94 boys is now being diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. This is truly alarming.

The US has a plan of action that is already well underway to address what Americans have now recognized as a national emergency. The COMBATING AUTISM ACT was signed by George W. Bush on December 19, 2006 and with its 2007 budget of over \$120 million, is empowering the National Institute of Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and other American organizations to conduct research into autism, offer early screening programs, raise public awareness and provide evidence-based treatment to those with an autism diagnosis.

We in Canada, have yet to see anything even close to resembling THE COMBATING AUTISM ACT that will help our nation's people with autism, like Michael and his family.

I am urging, and so should we all urge our federal politicians to take action and to do so quickly. As a nation, we cannot continue turning our backs on this crisis. It is not going away. In fact, the situation is becoming direr with every passing day. The Supreme Court of Canada has made it abundantly clear that it will not dictate what programs and services our governments should and should not provide, so after several lengthy and exhaustive legal battles including the "Auton" action in British Columbia and the "Deskin-Wynberg" case here in Ontario, families are not further ahead than they were over ten years ago when their legal endeavours began. Provinces continue refusing to step up and provide adequate treatment to their ever-growing autistic populations. Families are losing their homes and life savings in their brave albeit inadequate attempts to provide therapy privately to their autistic children.

Aging parents are struggling to meet the physically demanding needs of their growing or already grown up autistic children and have nowhere to turn in their state of desperate need. Marriage breakdowns are estimated at 75% when an untreated autistic child is being raised in the family home. The emotional and financial impact of autism on siblings is unimaginable.

Canada is urgently in need of a Federal Autism Strategy that will put a stop to this desperate situation. Such a strategy is certainly not a novel idea, as our country has been witness to many other precedents for federally conceived and led health related strategies

including the Woman's Health Strategy in 1999, a National Strategy to Reduce Tobacco Use in Canada, also in 1999, The Canadian Strategy on HIV/AIDS in 2000, the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer Initiative in 2006, and the Health Heart Strategy in 2007 to name only a handful. If we as a nation value our children's health and well-being, certainly what we ask is neither unreasonable nor extreme.

As the father of two great kids, I can imagine few things more painful for a parent than having a sick child and knowing an effective treatment exists but is not within reach simply because it is beyond the parents' financial means. In a country where publicly funded healthcare is suppose to be an inherent right of citizenship, there is something terribly wrong when one looks at the plight of Canada's people with autism. Fortunately, if we work together, we have the means to make things right.

I appeal directly to our federal politicians, regardless of partisan affiliation, to do what is right for these vulnerable Canadians, ones who cannot speak for themselves. I urge Canadians right across this country, to contact their MPs and provincial elected representatives. Let them know you want children afflicted with autism, and their desperate and often destitute parents, to be treated as equals in our society. Autistic individuals, child or adult, like all of us, deserve the chance to be the best they can be.

Thank you.