



— FEBRUARY 9, 2001

eFACTS, a summary of current newsworthy *facts* and *effects*, is made available to people who have a continuing interest in mental health reform in Alberta. We thought you should know:

1. The Provincial Government opens the next session of the Alberta Legislature on Monday, February 12. There are indications that the Throne Speech will include a renewed commitment to community-based mental health services. It is also likely that the Premier will that day announce an election to be held March 12.
2. The Alberta Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (AAMIMH), of which CMHA is a member, has sent "Candidate Briefing" packages to all candidates in the upcoming election. The materials include a fact sheet and brief information pieces on four issues: (1) the need for a Strategic Plan developed in consultation with stakeholders; (2) adequate funding for community programs and psychiatric beds in General Hospitals; (3) the need for comprehensive community services as defined in modern "best practices"; and (4) the need to continue improvements in children's mental health services, adding to the good initiatives begun over the past two years. CMHA members are encouraged to contact candidates and ask questions regarding any or all of the issues. The detail will be available from Division, any Regional office of CMHA or on the AAMIMH web site at www.mentalhealthalliance.ab.ca and select "urgent issues."
3. CMHA's proposal to partner with the SPCA and others to innovate a pet therapy program for people with mental illnesses has been approved for funding by the Provincial Government's Health Innovation Fund. The project will receive \$269,000 over a three-year period. More information is available from CMHA, Alberta Division.

4. In the January 22 edition of eFACTS (Item #8), we reported the Alberta Minister of Justice and Attorney General had turned down CMHA's proposal for a project which would have developed a framework for a program to divert mentally ill people from jail to more appropriate facilities. He did, however, support having Alberta Justice and Attorney General, the AMHB and other Government Departments develop a strategy of designing a diversion program. Since that time, a Deputy Ministers' Steering Committee has been struck, along with an Operations Committee, on which CMHA will have a seat. The project will also receive Health Innovation funding. CMHA's earlier proposal for a mentally ill persons and the Criminal Justice System conference will also be considered by the Operations Committee.
5. The Calgary Health Authority has recently released a five-year plan which supports community-based services, although it has no stated plans for any. It then reports that Alberta Hospital Ponoka (220 km away) will have "added space" for Calgary admissions. CMHA at local and Provincial levels is working to encourage the RHA to plan all services locally, publicly rejecting the Ponoka option.
6. In early February the government announced yet two more initiatives to support Alberta's youth. Two million dollars has been allocated to programs that encourage healthy development. Examples include prenatal nutrition, safe and caring schools and programs to target adolescent risk behaviours. A second program contains \$20 million to assist school districts in helping "special needs" students. School boards will now receive up to \$10,395 to assist these students, with the amount increasing to \$12,000 by year 2003/2004. Detailed information is available from Alberta Health and Wellness.
7. The College of Physicians and Surgeons has now approved standards which pave the way for the Health and Wellness Minister to allow overnight stays in private hospitals. While there are rumours of private psychiatric facilities in the future (they appear to be possible under the legislation), the Minister has assured the public that he would not approve any facility unless "there is a clear and explicit benefit to the public system."
8. The increased natural gas rebates announced on January 31 contain some benefit for some CMHA clients and operations. All benefits are "exempt from income" and so will not result in any reduction of

disability payments. Secondly, non-profit agencies that pay for their gas directly may apply for a rebate on natural gas of up to \$6 per gigajoule to a maximum of 5,000 gigajoules a month (\$30,000). More information is available on the Internet at www.gov.ab.ca/energyprices/index.cfm

9. The Alberta Medical Association's approximately 6,000 doctors will vote this month on a two-year agreement with Alberta Health and Wellness which will give them on average a 22% raise, making them amongst the highest paid in Canada. The specialty of psychiatry has received an extra boost which will jump their average income from \$150,000 to about \$200,000. They report that about half of the income is used to maintain their practices. The fees could help recruit psychiatrists to Alberta, particularly needed in the children's specialty. According to the Canadian Psychiatric Association, we have a serious shortage of psychiatrists; however, the shortage might also be mitigated by changing what we pay them to do (consultation rather than individual therapy), how we pay them (salaries rather than fee for service) and by utilizing other specialists (family physicians and psychologists) more effectively.
10. The Alberta Mental Health Board has now released their three Standing Committee priorities for the next year. They are:

PROGRAMS and SERVICES

Monitoring the development of the provincial programs; the Children's Mental Health Framework; the capital redevelopment of sites, hospitals and community facilities; business plan initiatives; suicide prevention initiatives and the AMHB Foundation. They will also provide direction related to strategic planning.

QUALITY and ACCOUNTABILITY

Monitoring quality improvement and accreditation planning, information systems and a communications plan.

LEGISLATIVE and ADVOCACY

Monitoring medical staff by-laws, AMHB regulations and housing strategies. They will also review the implications of Community Treatment Orders legislation and respond to advocacy issues relating to improving access to the brain injured and mentally ill.

11. We reported in the January 22 eFACTS (Item #1), the Weizmann Institute report that they have found a way to diagnose schizophrenia through a simple blood test, a finding which could revolutionize the diagnosis and treatment of schizophrenia, which responds much better to early diagnosis and treatment. In a far less definitive study, researchers at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore say they may have found a link between schizophrenia (and possibly bipolar disorder) and infections of the brain. One of their prime suspects is a parasite called toxoplasma which is found in cat feces and can be transmitted by a mother to her fetus with devastating effects on brain development.
12. The Schizophrenia Society of Canada (SSC) has received Federal funding to conduct a Canada-wide survey of people who suffer schizophrenia. They want determine their views on issues like medication, community services, hospital access and others. If you wish to participate, contact the SSC at (416) 445-2270 or visit their web site at www.schizophrenia.ca
13. The highly publicized killing of a family in Medicine Hat by a person who allegedly suffered schizophrenia was initially reported as a mental health "system failure." In fact, the evidence suggests the individual was little known to the "system," which may have had little or no opportunity to respond. This situation may again speak to the powerful influence of stigma and the need to diagnose and treat mental illnesses early.
14. A Brown University study reported in the American Journal of Psychiatry has provided some credence to the claim by some psychiatrists as to the efficacy of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). A small study group of 28 patients received ECT and medications while another 28 received medications alone. The chance of living without a relapse for two years was 93% versus 52% in the medication group. The ECT procedure is still considered highly intrusive by most and side effects can be serious. CMHA urges full informed and (competent) consent whenever it is used. A new procedure called "Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation" is now being clinically tested in the US as an alternative to ETC. It uses magnetic devices rather than electricity and the patient remains fully alert during treatment. There are apparently some positive initial results; however, it is not considered as "effective" as ECT .

15. The Capital Health Authority has reviewed its three-month experience with its "408-LINK" health line, which was an attempt to consolidate 23 previous information lines, and the results look good. Staffed by Registered Nurses, the lines receive an average of 850 calls on weekdays, with 500 on weekends. Sixty-four percent of all calls are for health advice, although only a small number of the total are mental health related. They do, however, apparently consume a much greater amount of staff time than others. The program is now planned to be expanded into Health Regions surrounding Edmonton and is being reviewed by the Calgary Health Authority.
16. The Alberta Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (AAMIMH) has presented "Options for the Future of Health Care" to a very receptive audience on the Premier's Advisory Council on Health. The presentation essentially covered the recommendations previously published by the Alliance and can be viewed on the AAMIMH web site at www.mentalhealthalliance.ab.ca The Premier's Advisory Council will present an interim report in about three months.
17. CMHA National has just released print materials and a video to promote educational opportunities for people who suffer a mental illness. Available in English and French, the materials describe best practices in "higher learning," a description of "the road to empowerment" and an "ode to learning." National and Division will promote the material in Alberta Learning facilities. More information is available from Division or on the National website at www.cmha.ca
18. Alberta Learning, the AMHB and the Alberta Teachers' Association have produced an excellent training package on Teaching Students with Emotional Disorders. The resource is designed to train educators and other professionals to help children whose "mental status" interferes with academic progress. The material is now being distributed throughout Alberta. More information is available from the sponsoring organizations.

For more information, phone 482-6576.

*Alberta Division
Canadian Mental Health Association
328 Capital Place, 9707 - 110 Street NW
Edmonton, AB T5K 2L9*

*Phone: (780) 482-6576; Fax: (780) 482-6348
E-mail: division@cmha.ab.ca
Web site: <http://www.cmha.ab.ca>*