



— JANUARY 7, 2002 (HAPPY NEW YEAR!)

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

1. The government will table the report of The Premier's Council on the Future of Health Care (Mazankowski Report) on Tuesday morning, January 8. Members of the Association and the Alberta Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (AAMIMH) will be in attendance. Along with the AAMIMH, CMHA has worked hard to influence the thinking of the Council and reliable information would suggest the Council will recommend the integration of mental health services with Regional Health Authorities (RHAs) and a renewed emphasis on community support services. Of some concern, however, is the potential for deinsuring of some services. Physician charges for mental health treatment is the highest single category of billings in the province (\$88 million), and their elimination or reduction could be a tempting target.
2. At a Christmas invitational reception, new Alberta Medical Association President Dr. Robert Hollinshead has confirmed the AMA has lobbied the Minister of Health and Wellness in support of the AAMIMH policy of integrated services.
3. On January 2, in preparation for the release of the Mazankowski report, the government began a massive media campaign entitled *Health First*. It urged Albertans to learn more about the challenges and choice facing Albertans. Detailed information is available through a pamphlet and at www.gov.ab.ca or by calling 310-4455 toll free. In the materials, the government identifies eight new "epidemics." Mental illnesses and suicide are listed as two of the eight.

4. The CMHA's resistance to providing all client information to the government's Alberta Mental Health Board is creating tension between the two bodies. A legal interpretation of the "custodian" section of the Health Information Act is being developed by CMHA lawyers working "pro bono," and that opinion will form the basis of next steps, including presentations to the Privacy Commissioner and Minister. The Alberta Medical Association has also expressed interest in the issue as it also affects some of their members. Meetings are scheduled. In the interim, no personal information on CMHA clients will be released.
5. The Alberta Legislature will sit in late January, earlier than normal; however, it is expected to be a long session dealing with numerous health and budget issues.
6. The Alberta budget rollback of 1% for fiscal year 2001/2002 has not seemed to damage mental health programs. There are no reports of rollbacks within the RHAs and the Alberta Mental Health Board has absorbed the loss without service reductions. Funded agencies were not reduced. The rumoured 3% rollback for 2002/2003 could, however, have an impact throughout the system.
7. The Alberta Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health met on December 19 and re-elected CMHA representative Dennis Anderson as Chair, and Psychologists Association liaison George Lucki as Vice-Chair. The committee reaffirmed priorities in relation to the divestment of services, promoting "best practices" and protecting mental health budgets from cutbacks.
8. A series of letters to the editor in the Edmonton Journal, critical of the Alberta Mental Health Board, has resulted in a threat of litigation aimed at Alberta Hospital Edmonton physicians. According to AMHB lawyers, CEO Ken Sheehan and Dr. Pierre Beausejour were defamed. A couriered letter to all of the doctors demands a retraction or apology under threat of further action. The physicians will meet January 11 in order to determine their response. CMHA sources indicate the AMHB will be aggressive about any future public criticism of its performance. One of the criticisms of the AMHB relates to their administrative costs. They have increased by 20% in 2000/2001 over the previous year. After two major renovations of their offices in the Telus tower, the AMHB is now building new corporate offices in Airdrie at a rumoured cost of \$6 million – a location convenient to many of

the AMHB leadership who come from the Ponoka area. The Board has rationalized that the construction money comes from a different department and is unrelated to their service dollars.

9. Extensive publicity of a late-night visit by Premier Klein to an Edmonton housing program may have some spin-off benefits. It drew media attention to the plight of the homeless in Alberta. If the Province contributes to the \$68 million for Alberta announced in the mid-December Federal budget, Albertans, including those with mental illnesses, may have some new options. CMHA branches across the province have been working for months to capitalize on the new resources. Unfortunately, in spite of their own declared priority, the AMHB has confirmed they have no new money for programming in any new homes.
10. Alberta's Mental Health Patient Advocate released his 2000 Annual report at the end of 2001. He notes that formal certification (involuntary admissions) has increased by 18% (an estimated 3,300 patients), now accounting for 27% of admissions. Once again the Advocate called for an expansion of his mandate. CMHA is currently studying the treatment of involuntary patients in the province and the reasons behind any increase will be included in that review.
11. Alberta Learning Minister Lyle Oberg has publicly mused about the need to "take a serious look at special education and find better ways to do it." One possibility he wondered about, was removing disabled students from regular classes. A key question for advocates is who the "better way" is to serve – administrators, teachers or the students themselves.
12. On December 5, the Cabinet reappointed the existing members of the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities until December 31, 2003. Many people predict the Council will be dissolved at that time.
13. The Alberta Mental Health Self Help Network featured a moving article on CMHA Past President Dennis Anderson entitled *A life lived well – despite illness*. Copies are available from the Alberta Division.

14. The November edition of *Schizophrenia Digest* (received in December) includes a significant article on pet therapy featuring CMHA's Chimo project. A copy can be obtained from the Alberta Division.
15. The AMHB, in partnership with the Heritage Foundation for Medical Research, is attempting to develop a "population-based mental health/illness surveillance system" in Alberta. More detail will be provided as information is received.

For more information contact the Alberta Division of the Canadian Mental Health Association.

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