

April 29, 2005

Honourable Iris Evans, Minister
Alberta Health and Wellness
323 Legislature Bldg.
10800 – 97 Avenue
Edmonton T5K 2B6

Dear Minister:

Thank you for your letter of January 11, 2005. We have taken your advice and have met with Mr. Ray Block of the Alberta Mental Health Board to discuss the possibility of establishing a Provincial psychology aid program. Mr. Block has agreed to explore this idea with us and to make some preliminary inquiries into the background and research information that may be needed for such a project. We will be having further meetings with Mr. Block in the near future.

We are writing on behalf of the Psychologists' Association of Alberta to ask you to meet with us to discuss other ways in which psychology could be involved in enhancing the health of Albertans.

There are three key aspects of health and wellness we would particularly like to discuss with you. They are:

- 1) Implementation of the Provincial Mental Health Plan;
- 2) Implementation of the Local Primary Care Initiatives; and
- 3) The role of psychology in general health and wellness in the Province.

It is our belief that the health care system has not given sufficient attention to the mind/body connection and that this has had a serious detrimental effect not only on the psychological/mental health of patients, but also on their physical health and wellness.

We know that most depressed patients visiting primary care physicians do not openly present their psychological problems and that the depression often goes unrecognized and untreated. Yet in spite of this fact, **depression is the fastest rising diagnosis made by office based physicians.**

We know that the most common diagnoses made by doctors **are hypertension, followed by depression and diabetes.**

What is perhaps less well recognized is that these illnesses are all related to behaviour, and that psychologists, who are the experts with the most training in behavioural changes are greatly underutilized in the Alberta health care system. Psychologists specialize in the behavioural, cognitive, and emotional/affective components of life. They tend to focus on the wellness aspects of health, and no other profession has equivalent training in this area (7-9 years of university training, roughly equivalent to the training of a family physician, but with a different focus).

Doctor Herbert Benson, M.D. is the Founding President, Mind/Body Medical Institute and an Associate professor of Medicine at the Harvard Medical School. He explains that there are three major pillars (he calls them the “three legs of the stool”) involved in the effective delivery of health services. They are pharmacology, surgery, and behaviour. Unfortunately, it appears that the stool is teetering on two legs, i.e. pharmacology and surgery. This is not particularly surprising because that is what doctors are trained to provide, and those with the expertise in behavioural interventions have not been used to potential in our health care system.

It has been reported that the six leading causes of death in North America are:

- Heart disease
- Cancer
- Liver disease
- Lung disease
- Automobile accidents
- Suicide

All of these leading causes of death are related to behaviour.

We recognize that Alberta Health and Wellness has addressed the behavioural aspects of health through some excellent programs aimed at education and public awareness. However education alone is not sufficient. There is a need for recognition of a patient’s readiness for change and of the psychological stages of change the patient undergoes. Clearly many Albertans need professional help with motivation, planning, and implementing behavioural strategies to combat their health problems. Psychologists are trained in the development of a collaborative therapeutic alliance that enhances patient self-management of health care problems. Psychologists also focus on a patient’s readiness for change, and it has been shown that treatment methods that are targeted to a patient stage of change produce greater modifications in health behaviour.

It is our sincere wish to work in close cooperation with you and your ministry in arriving at solutions that will enhance the health and wellness of Albertans.

We urge you to review our attached notes on the research and evidence that support our position, to have your staff study them in detail, and to call us for a meeting to discuss how we can work jointly in finding solutions to these problems.

Yours truly,

Sally Barros, Ph.D. C.Psych.
President

Pierre Berube, M.Ed. C.Psych.
Executive Director