Children's Healthcare Canada | Santé des enfants Canada

Submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health: Advancing Bill C-277, An Act to Establish a National Strategy on Brain Injuries

Children's Healthcare Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada unequivocally endorse Bill C-277, An Act to establish a national strategy on brain injuries. This critical piece of legislation, passed unanimously by the House of Commons on June 12, 2024, represents an unprecedented opportunity to address one of the most urgent and overlooked health challenges facing Canadians—traumatic brain injury (TBI).

TBI affects over 165,000 Canadians, many of whom are children and youth. Traumatic brain injury is the leading cause of death and disability among children, and its effects ripple across their entire lives. The passage of Bill C-277 would transform how we approach this crisis, filling a long-standing void in national policy and ensuring that Canada takes decisive action to protect and support its most vulnerable citizens.

The Profound Impact on Children and Youth

The devastating impact of traumatic brain injuries on children and youth cannot be overstated. TBI robs young people of their potential, causing severe cognitive, behavioral, and emotional impairments. It disrupts educational attainment, limits social development, and hinders emotional well-being. Most tragically, it imposes life-long burdens that extend far beyond the injury itself, affecting not only the child but also their families and communities.

Research underscores the severity of the issue. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 475,000 children between the ages of 0-14 suffer from traumatic brain injuries annually, with the highest incidence among children aged 0-4. Yet in Canada, we have little data and even fewer coordinated strategies to address the scale of the problem. This data gap underscores the urgent need for increased research and investment to better understand how TBIs affect Canadian children and youth.

Bill C-277 would not only spotlight this crisis but would also establish a national framework to ensure that children with TBIs are provided with the care, resources, and rehabilitation they need to lead full and meaningful lives. It is essential that we move beyond fragmented care and develop a coordinated, comprehensive approach that prioritizes the long-term health and well-being of children living with brain injuries.

The Disproportionate Impact on Indigenous Children

One of the most troubling aspects of TBI is its disproportionate effect on Indigenous children. Due to intersecting factors such as poverty, geographic isolation, limited access to healthcare services, and the ongoing impacts of intergenerational trauma, Indigenous children face a significantly higher risk of sustaining a traumatic brain injury compared with their non-Indigenous peers. Studies have shown that Indigenous children are more vulnerable to poor outcomes following TBI due to these systemic barriers, compounding the already severe consequences of brain injury.

Undiagnosed and untreated brain injuries among Indigenous youth can lead to serious long-term consequences, including increased risks of homelessness and involvement with the criminal justice system. These outcomes represent a failure of our healthcare and social systems to provide timely, effective interventions for brain-injured children.

Bill C-277 provides an essential opportunity to address these disparities and ensure that all Canadian children—regardless of their background—receive the care and support they need to recover and thrive.

The Critical Need for Bill C-277

Traumatic brain injury is a hidden epidemic. Despite its devastating and far-reaching effects, it remains an under-recognized and under-researched health condition in Canada. The consequences of ignoring this issue are stark—children continue to suffer, families continue to struggle, and our healthcare system remains under-equipped to provide the comprehensive support these individuals desperately need.

The passage of Bill C-277 would represent a watershed moment in Canadian healthcare. It would propel the issue of brain injury to the forefront of national health priorities and establish a unified approach to tackling the challenges of awareness, prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. Crucially, it would address glaring gaps in research and data collection, ensuring that we develop evidence-based solutions that truly meet the needs of children and youth affected by TBI.

A National Strategy: A Lifeline for Children

By implementing a national strategy on brain injuries, we can fundamentally change the trajectory for thousands of children and their families. The strategy would provide a comprehensive, evidence-based framework to guide federal and provincial governments in creating policies and allocating resources to improve care for individuals with TBI. It would foster collaboration between healthcare providers, researchers, and policymakers, ensuring that efforts to prevent and treat brain injuries are cohesive and impactful.

Most importantly, the strategy should prioritize children and youth—ensuring they receive timely, effective, and coordinated care that addresses their unique developmental needs. From prevention to rehabilitation, every step of the care journey would be designed to support the best possible outcomes for young Canadians.

Recommendations

Children's Healthcare Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada strongly recommend that the Standing Committee on Health (HESA) adopt the following actions to ensure Bill C-277 achieves its full potential:

1. **Accelerate Research and Data Collection**: It is imperative to invest in and promote standardized, national data collection on the incidence and prevalence of TBI among children and youth. Without this critical data, we cannot fully understand the scale of the issue or develop effective interventions.

2. **Involve Child Health and Indigenous Experts**: Child health and Indigenous experts across all stages of care must be included in the task force responsible for developing the national strategy. Their specialized knowledge is essential for crafting policies that reflect the specific needs of children and youth with brain injuries.

3. **Establish National Guidelines for Brain Injury Care**: The development of comprehensive, national guidelines on the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation of brain injuries in children is critical. These guidelines will ensure that every child in Canada receives high-quality, consistent care, regardless of where they live.

4. **Enhance Post-Acute Care and Rehabilitation Services**: The national strategy must prioritize the optimization and streamlining of post-acute care, rehabilitation, and community services for children with TBI. Families must have access to the services and support they need to navigate the complex and often overwhelming recovery process.

Bill C-277 represents a distinct opportunity to radically improve the health and well-being of Canadian children affected by traumatic brain injuries. By enacting this legislation and implementing a national strategy, we can ensure that children and youth with TBI receive the care, resources, and support they need to not only survive but thrive.

Children's Healthcare Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada call upon the Standing Committee on Health (HESA) to advance this legislation swiftly and decisively. Together, we can build a future where every child affected by brain injury has the chance to reach their full potential.

About Us:

Children's Healthcare Canada is a national association serving healthcare delivery organizations that care for children and youth. Together with our members, we work to accelerate excellence and innovation in health systems serving children, youth, and their families across the continuum of care. Our members deliver health services to millions of children and youth across Canada, and include all sixteen children's hospitals, community hospitals, rehabilitation hospitals, home and respite care agencies, children's treatment centres, and regional health authorities.

The Pediatric Chairs of Canada is comprised of the department heads of Pediatrics within Canada's seventeen medical schools. PCC provides national leadership to strengthen the future of pediatrics, advancing education, workforce planning and research in support of excellent care for children and youth.