

June 12th, 2020

To The Honourable Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education,

We are a group of physicians who work closely with children and youth with neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism spectrum disorder, FASD, learning disabilities, ADHD, and cerebral palsy. The closure of schools in the province of Ontario and the uncertainty around the reintegration of children and youth concerns us with respect to the well-being of the patients we serve and their families and caregivers.

During the time that children have been at home supported by parents, we have seen an increase in requests for medication by parents given the reduced programming and support from schools and daycares. Anxieties have heightened, behaviors are more intense, and there are increased referrals for consideration for residential placements. In a short inquiry among our 160 members reflecting the fields of developmental pediatrics, child neurology, psychiatry and psychology, **64% indicated a worsening of the emotional and behavioural state of their patients, in an average of 5-10 patients/families. Almost 50% reported an increase in requests for psychotropic medications to manage such challenging behaviours, which indicates the level of despair and impact of not having other resources and supports available.** It would be important for the government to capture these trends more formally in an attempt to anticipate the issues that will inform re-integration.

At the provincial level, we are excited to hear about a phased approach to re-integrate across multiple sectors, including education, social services and health care. The work your ministry has done to mitigate the effects of the pandemic is impressive. There is still significant lack of clarity as to how reintroducing children to congregate settings will be done practically. **From our perspective, priority should be given to support the children with neurodevelopmental disabilities to gain access to their school environment, day programs in the summer, and therapy services, as we fear the risk of long-term mental health impacts, both on our patients and their caregivers.**

We also need to learn from other jurisdictions across the country and internationally. For example, in Quebec, since May 11th, outside Montreal, optional attendance at school and daycare has been allowed, with a low level of cases, that have been minor and manageable. An open letter was posted by a group of physicians on June 6th and supported by about 1000 other physicians and 1500 professionals in education and social services, highlighting many recent studies demonstrating that children are unlikely to catch COVID-19 or to suffer serious health effects if they do, and transmission of COVID-19 from children to adults is rare. They also highlighted the current measures in Quebec that are unnecessary and likely resulting in more harm than benefit, and made recommendations relaxing the social distancing and infection control procedures for some ages and situations.

<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/physicians-demand-legault-ease-restriction-rules-for-children>

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In conclusion, we want you to be aware that there are significant negative consequences from the COVID-19 restrictions on some children with neurodevelopmental disorders and their families. We feel the harms of school, therapy, and camp closures outweigh the benefits, and strongly recommend that optional attendance at daycares, summer day programs and camps be allowed to open with priority for these more vulnerable citizens. This needs to happen immediately, with thoughtful consideration given to the social distancing and infection control procedures recommended.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Alvin Loh', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Alvin Loh, MD, FRCPC
Chair of PONDA, on behalf of the Steering Committee
Physicians of Ontario Neurodevelopmental Advocacy

Cc: The Honourable Todd Smith, Minister of Children and Community Services
Cc: The Honourable Christine Elliot, Minister of Health and Long Term Care