

CASLPA advocates for the professions – Meets with Federal Health Minister

The federal minister of health, Ujjal Dosanjh, represents my constituency of Vancouver South in parliament. With a federal election on the horizon, I saw this connection as an excellent opportunity to bring the issues of communication disorders and the professions to the attention of Minister Dosanjh. I sent a friendly note congratulating him on some current national health initiatives and requested a meeting to discuss communication disorders and the work being done by CASLPA and speech-language pathologists and audiologists.. I was pleasantly surprised to receive a phone call from his constituency office a few weeks later, inviting me to visit him on November 8th, 2005 to address my issues and concerns. I suspected that introducing Minister Dosanjh to a fellow Canadian who is struggling with a communication challenge would deliver a stronger message than mere strategic dialogue, so I invited my friend Pete to come with me.

Peter Martin (Pete) is a 50 year old man who underwent neurosurgery to treat a severe limb tremor that emerged in 1977. Subsequent to the surgery, he developed dystonia, which has rendered him essentially aphonic. He also has difficulty with chewing and swallowing, and although he is ambulatory, does not have normal limb function. Pete underwent many months of rehabilitation following his surgery but was unable to recover reliable speech functions. He struggles to nourish himself but perseveres with pureed soups and soft foods. He supports himself and his wife, who also has physical challenges. In the past year, with the assistance of three dedicated speech-language pathologists, he obtained a Lite Writer™, a portable voice-output device, which has given him a new freedom and the ability to manage his contracting business independently. He has a great spirit and a unique sense of humour, as depicted in his written story, which he shared on November 8th, 2005, with Minister Ujjal Dosanjh:

“Prior to 1977, when I took ill, I was very outgoing, working in the mines of Thompson, Manitoba as a driller and blasting. I had a popular band (singer) backing up some of the best bands. I was also a mechanic.

Speech is so important in today’s society that after losing my speech in 1978 somehow the system forgot about me as though to say ‘oh well’. Well, for me that was not good enough and trying every day to get a job was extremely hard. I have my own contracting business, but it’s tough going when the general public does not understand. Some of the things that have happened to me before I got this machine are:

Going into a bank and handing the teller a note, well I never saw so many police all at one time in my life who were not on a coffee break.

Accused of breathing heavy on the phone and having BC Tel call telling me that our phone service will be cancelled if this continues.

Going into a restaurant after work, again with a note, the waiter thought I was begging for money and didn’t even read the note, escorted me out and gave me a loonie and told me never to come back.

Financial issues. Not being able to get the work because of communication problems. Our society today labels us with having a handicap... well, I see it as being the other way around.

What would happen if you didn't talk for a 24 hour period. Just for fun, try it for 8 hours.

But now this machine that I have had for the past 6 months is so important not only to me but others who suffer from the problem. It would make lives more enjoyable and put them back into society.

A prime example is: this weekend my mother-in-law fell, breaking her hip and shoulder so my wife is staying with her dad. Now that I am home myself with the phone ringing 20 to 30 times a day, all I do is have a message pre-programmed into this device and call the people back, playing my message. It works, but some modifications are required.

In addition to delivering Pete's poignant message, we discussed the importance of government support for CASLPA's current initiatives:

- The Noisy Toys campaign - Minister Dosanjh commented that he was concerned about the impact of loud devices on people's hearing. He can hear his three sons coming home from the end of the city block with their car stereos booming. Waitlists and benchmarking – Minister Dosanjh agreed that communication is a health issue and assured us that federal health initiatives that are focusing initially on life-threatening issues will also encompass chronic health concerns like speech, language and hearing.
- Shortages of S-LPs and audiologists – Minister Dosanjh listened to my concerns about Canadians' problems of limited access to necessary services, the profession's problems of recruitment and retention and the need for government departments such as health and education to work together to solve these problems.
- Awareness of communication problems among Canadians and the role S-LPs and audiologists play to mitigate these – Minister Dosanjh emphasized that the “squeaky wheel gets the grease”. He encouraged us to work at provincial and national levels to make politicians and the public aware of the problems, the gaps and the solutions. He reminded me that the federal government is heavily influenced in its health and education initiatives by provincial governments. He suggested that we make ourselves visible and audible at every opportunity and use media to get the message across. He stated that we now have his attention and we should persevere by sending messages to provincial ministers responsible for programs for the communicatively impaired. He embraced and thanked us for our important work.

Help CASLPA put the issues of communication disorders and the professions at the forefront of the government's agenda. Contact your provincial or federal member of parliament to discuss these matters. The contact you make with decision-makers will work to help us fight for what we need: timely access to audiology, speech and/or language services for Canadians, investments in health human resources and homegrown professionals and resolution to third-party payer issues.

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