



CANADA

Debates of the Senate

1st SESSION

•

38th PARLIAMENT

•

VOLUME 142

•

NUMBER 9

AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH

Statement by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Wednesday, October 27, 2004

THE SENATE

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AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH

Hon. Vivienne Poy: Honourable senators, last week Senator Oliver brought it to our attention that October is Autism Awareness Month and referred to hopeful developments in science that are making treatment for autism possible. Those treatments, though, however effective, must be accessible and affordable. From letters I have received recently, this is not the case with autism or, for that matter, with other developmental disorders suffered by many children. The parents of these children are pleading with parliamentarians for our help.

Like Senator Munson, I am concerned that these treatments, particularly the intensive therapy that is required before the age of six, are not available to enough individuals. Those seeking help are forced to wade through a patchwork system, often being placed on long waiting lists, or going into debt, to pay for costly treatments themselves.

Children who suffer from autism and other developmental disabilities cannot wait for our help. If they are not treated at a very young age, society will pay for their support throughout their lives. As both Senators Oliver and Munson noted, the number of individuals who are diagnosed with autism is rising exponentially. We need a national autism strategy now.

Honourable senators, I have received many letters from constituents seeking help. One of them was from the public

servant, the one Senator Munson mentioned in his statement, who spent his lunch hour marching on the Hill, calling for action on autism. He was there because he could see no other way to have an impact.

Some parents I know are fundraising for themselves; others are forming their own support networks, such as Giant Steps Toronto, which is part of a worldwide group of educational centres for children that aims to integrate autistic children into society.

I also know a woman whose own struggles to cope with her child's array of developmental disorders led her to found an organization called Spirit of Life. This organization reaches out to parents and provides networking and resources to those who feel isolated and alone.

These are brave and courageous parents doing their best in the face of very difficult circumstances.

It is important that the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, which is currently studying mental health and mental illness, look at the issues of autism and other developmental disorders and their treatment and that it make recommendations for action so that parents and their children do not have to cope alone.
