

The Honourable Michael de Jong, MLA  
Minister of Health  
Room 337, Parliament Buildings  
Victoria, B.C., V8V 1X4

April 6, 2011

Dear Minister,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of REACH community health centre, I am writing to both welcome you into your role as Minister of Health and to enquire about the future of the Therapeutics Initiative. We have followed the discussion, since the release of the report by the Pharmaceutical Task Force with growing concern that this invaluable resource could be under threat.

REACH Community Health Centre has a 40 year history of providing innovative primary health and dental care that are accessible and cost-effective services in East Vancouver. Our staff includes physicians, advanced practice nurses, dentists, counsellors, outreach workers and a consulting, pharmacist. We were early innovators of primary health care teams, adding a clinical pharmacist to assist medical staff and patients in making evidence based and wise decisions in the use of pharmaceuticals.

The Therapeutics Initiative has played an essential role in our ability to access timely high quality information that is free of the bias that has pervaded much of the communications provided by pharmaceutical companies to health professionals and, sadly, the general public. The T.I. enables us to provide up-to-date, evidence-based, practical information about rational drug therapy. This includes excellent summations of medication use patterns, as well as unbiased evaluations of clinical trial results and scientific evidence.

One important example of this is the information it published on the increased risk of bone fractures in relation to bisphosphonates. The information provided by the TI on the risks associated with Vioxx and Avandia are more well-known, but its work on psychiatric medication use, metformin and other drugs is equally important and useful. The information provided by the TI has had a positive impact on prescribing practices and an overall positive influence on our health and well-being.

We are concerned that the withdrawal of the TI's core funding by the government will undermine its ability to continue playing this role. The TI needs stable funding to retain staff and to be able to respond quickly and knowledgeably to the evidence questions that are of critical interest to patients and their health care providers. We believe that there is strong evidence that removing this capacity will increase health risks for patients and unnecessary costs, much less liabilities, for our health care system.

We fear that without core funding the level of expertise and cohesiveness among members of the Therapeutics Initiative will be compromised and, along with it, the safety of those who rely on prescription medicines.

We are also concerned that the recommendations arising from the Task Force will reduce timeliness and excellence while also allowing much greater industry influence in the process for recommendations for the formulary. We believe that a rigorous review process is even more important as there is increasing evidence of the bias in the reporting of outcomes in industry supported research. Attached you will find a recent article by Joel Lexchin which discusses this in further detail<sup>i</sup>. It is the staff at the Therapeutics Initiative that has developed the very skill set needed to see past this bias in reporting.

The reports we have received from our clients, physicians and our pharmacist about the role of the TI in their practices have been overwhelmingly positive.

Therefore, we urge you to reconsider the current plan. We ask that you develop a long term strategy that will ensure the on-going viability of the Therapeutics Initiative, including increased core funding for the group. We also believe it is time to increase patients' understanding of medications – their risks and benefits.

We would welcome an opportunity to discuss this with you or your staff in further detail and invite you to visit REACH so you can have an opportunity to see the TI's impact. Please contact our Executive Director, Madeline Boscoe at 604-2545456, ext. 1 to discuss this further.

On behalf of the board,

Sincerely,

Ruth Herman,  
Chair

c.c. Therapeutics Initiative, UBC  
Canadian Association of Community Health Centres,  
BC Public Health Association,  
BC Medical Association,  
Dean of Medicine and the Dean of Pharmacy, UBC,  
B.C. Health Coalition,  
Steering Committee, BC Patient Voices Network  
Board of Directors, IMPACT B.C.

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<sup>i</sup> Lexchin, J., "Those Who Have the Gold Make the Evidence: How the Pharmaceutical Industry Biases the Outcomes of Clinical Trials of Medication", Science and Engineering Ethics, 15 February 2011. Accessed April 6, 2011.

<http://www.springerlink.com/content/k3306qh046375277/>