

The Toronto Star
Wed 31 Mar 2004
By: Theresa Boyle

**Meningitis vaccination plan in the works for Ontarians;
Parents of infected, doctors make plea for free shots Smitherman says
announcement likely in coming budget**

Health Minister George Smitherman says his government will begin funding meningitis shots for children within the next year.

"The commitment is an extensive immunization plan that would offer protection against meningitis to kids," he told reporters yesterday.

The provincial government is expected to table a budget in May that will contain details of the vaccination plan.

"We're doing the planning work now and I would expect that some of this relates to the upcoming budget ... we expect we'll get going on this stuff in '04-'05, for sure. It's a big priority for us," he said, adding the plan is being developed chief medical officer of health, Dr. Sheela Basrur.

The immunization plan was a commitment in the Liberal platform.

Smitherman admitted his government is being nudged along by last week's federal budget, which included \$300 million for a national immunization strategy to ensure children across Canada have equal access to vaccines.

His comments came hours after medical experts and families of children who contracted meningitis implored the government to fund a universal vaccination program.

"No more children should suffer when there are safe and effective vaccines available to protect them," Kathryn Blain, chair of the Meningitis Research Foundation of Canada, told a news conference.

Her son Michael died after infection with the meningitis bacteria in 1995.

"The vaccine is free in Nunavut. Do they have a higher GDP than Ontario?" asked Dr. Norman Blustein, pediatrician at York Central Hospital and founder of the Richmond Hill Children's Centre.

Vaccination programs to protect newborns against meningitis also exist in British Columbia and Alberta.

"Less than 20 per cent of children in Ontario are being vaccinated, mainly because of the cost," he said, noting it can cost up to \$800 to inoculate one child against meningococcal disease and pneumococcal meningitis.

Meningitis struck Blustein's daughter four years ago. Then 4-year-old Dana tumbled down some stairs and suffered a minor head injury that allowed pneumococcal bacteria to invade her body. Within a day, the toddler was clinging to life.

"The last thing she said to me before she slipped into a coma was, "Daddy, I can't hear you. Why are you pretending to talk?" an emotional Blustein recalled. Dana survived, but was left deaf.

Dr. Marina Salvadori, a pediatric infectious disease consultant at the London Health Sciences Centre, said it is unfair that access is limited to those with the financial means. "Ability to pay should not determine the vaccination status in the health of a child."