

McGuinty government announces start of free child vaccination program

Young Ontarians Will Be Protected With Three New Vaccines Starting in July and September

TORONTO, June 9 /CNW/ - The McGuinty government is moving quickly to protect the health of children in Ontario by providing free vaccinations against pneumococcal disease, chicken pox and meningitis, Health and Long-Term Care Minister George Smitherman announced today.

"Infants and very young children are the most vulnerable members of our society, and we need to do everything possible to protect them from illness and death," Smitherman said. "Our government is making Ontario a leader in preventing childhood diseases and we are doing it as quickly as possible. With this program, we will be going from a province with one of the worst records on immunization, to one of the best. We're delivering real positive change that will keep Ontarians healthy."

The program will be fully implemented by January 1, 2005. Starting on that date, all children born in Ontario on, or after, January 1, 2004, will have access to the three new free vaccines, as part of their routine immunization.

"I'm delighted we're responding quickly to parents who have been anxious to know when we would be starting our new free vaccination programs," said Dr. Sheela Basrur, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. "Vaccinations must and will be available to all who need them."

"It is expected that covering the cost of the three vaccines will save Ontario parents more than \$600 per child. The Plan for Change Budget last month included \$156 million, over three years, to add these three new free vaccinations."

"The McGuinty government has demonstrated real leadership by adding the meningococcal and pneumococcal meningitis vaccines on the province's routine immunization schedule," said Kathryn Blain, Chair of the Meningitis Research Foundation of Canada, who lost her son Michael Longo in 1995 to meningococcal septicemia.

"Ontario's move will help ensure that children no longer suffer from the effects of these preventable diseases. As a paediatrician, I am relieved to see Ontario moving to make the vaccines available to children quickly and free of charge to parents," said Dr. Diane Sacks, president of the Canadian Paediatric Society. "Making sure that all children are immunized against serious diseases, regardless of a families personal financial situation, is a key step in ensuring the health of young Ontarians."