

# Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care

## McGuinty government's free childhood immunization program begins second phase

### Free Vaccines against Chicken Pox and Meningitis Now Available to Protect Children

**TORONTO, Aug. 31 /CNW/** - The McGuinty government today announced that new vaccinations for meningitis and chicken pox will be available beginning September 1 - part of Ontario's free childhood immunization program. "The pursuit of good health and prevention must begin with children," Smitherman said. "Our free childhood immunization program will spare children from the devastating impact of these preventable diseases."

Starting September 1, 2004, children born on or after September 1, 2003 will be eligible to receive free vaccines for meningitis (meningococcal C- conjugate) and chicken pox (varicella) on or shortly after their first birthday. The government is investing \$156 million over three years to add the three new vaccinations for pneumococcal disease, chicken pox and meningitis.

This plan will see 3.3 million Ontario children vaccinated without charge. The three new free vaccines will save parents more than \$600 per child. The government is also launching a public education program to make parents and health care providers aware of the new three immunizations - including for invasive pneumococcal disease, which was introduced on July 1 for high-risk children, aged two to four.

"Vaccination is one of the best ways to protect children against some very serious infections," according to Dr. Sheela Basrur, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. "This government's expansion of publicly-funded vaccines is an important step forward in protecting and promoting the health of the public."

The program will be fully implemented on January 1, 2005, when all children born on or after January 1, 2004 will have access to the three vaccines as part of routine immunization. "Ontario is one of the only provinces that immunizes children free of charge against chicken pox and meningitis," Smitherman said. "This is another big step in our plan to transform this province's health care system into one that protects children, helps families, and benefits all Ontarians."

"Childhood immunizations speak to the goal we all have as parents, to keep our children healthy and safe. Through my years as a medical officer of health, and as a practicing pediatrician, I have seen first-hand significant tragedy for children and their families from what are now preventable diseases," said Dr. Robin Williams, Medical Officer of Health for the Niagara Region. "Every child deserves the best possible start to their early years, and this includes equal protection through the provision of these vaccines for meningitis and chicken pox."