



**G**ood health is a lifelong commitment. But a healthy start in life is critically important because a child's physical and mental development during the early years determines, to a large degree, his or her health as an adult. This is why child health has always been near the top of the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) agenda.

Last year in these pages, Dr. Colin McMillan, then president of the CMA, talked about diseases of want and diseases of excess. He noted that Canadian children are dying from both and that many may not live as many years as their parents.

His editorial followed a CMA initiative in the spring of 2007 when, in partnership with the Canadian Paediatric Society and the College of Family Physicians of Canada, it convened a Child Health Summit. The results were the Child and Youth Health Charter and the Child and Youth Health Challenge.

In these declarations, the CMA sets forth its belief that all children should have access to the best possible start in life, including opportunities to grow and develop in a safe, supportive environment. In the CMA's view, the foundation that allows children to maximize their potential later includes the following: clean water and soil, excellent prenatal and pediatric health care, proper nutrition and early learning opportunities.

The CMA is focusing its attention on the period from conception to five years of age because during this critical time, doctors are in the best position to make a difference. Emerging research is underscoring just how pivotal these early years are.

But why is the CMA making such a big deal about this issue? Surely, most Canadian children grow up in a healthy environment. If only it were so. In fact, Canada



ranks very poorly among the world's developed countries when it comes to several measures of child and youth health and well-being. Our nation ranks 21st in child well-being, 27th in child obesity and 22nd in preventable child injuries and deaths.

That's why the CMA wants action and why I feel we need to keep this issue before the public eye. Our commitment was re-emphasized during our 2008 annual meeting last August when the "Parliament of Canadian Medicine" passed several resolutions dealing with early child health. Delegates called on the

federal government to establish a National Office of Child Health led by a national adviser on healthy children. It also called on Ottawa to develop a national health strategy that includes a strong focus on early childhood development. Other resolutions adopted at the meeting urged governments to promote child immunization and called on the federal government to participate in research on the impact of environmental toxins on child health.

The CMA feels strongly that a large part of Canada's poor showing on this front can be laid at the feet of politicians and planners, who have done a poor job of coordinating child health activities at the provincial and national levels. Since the early years are critical ones for so many aspects of development, it is time to acknowledge that we are not doing enough to protect the health of our very young children and that everyone must work toward a solution.

*Dr. Robert Ouellet*  
*President*

*Canadian Medical Association*

Since the early years are critical ones for so many aspects of development, it is time to acknowledge that we are not doing enough to protect the health of our very young children and that everyone must work toward a solution