

## **Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Pellizzari, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough County-City Health Unit**

*Tuesday, June 9, 2015*

### **It's Time to Talk About a "BIG" Idea**

Across Canada, more and more people are starting to talk about the BIG idea of a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG), also known as a guaranteed annual income. On Monday, June 8, medical officers of health and members of boards of health from across Ontario met in Ottawa and on their agenda was a resolution calling on federal and provincial governments to replace existing social assistance programs with a guaranteed annual income, similar to what is currently available for all seniors in Canada. I attended, and had the support of the Peterborough County-City board of health to vote in favour of the resolution. Why is our provincial public health sector so concerned about economics?

A Basic Income Guarantee would ensure that everyone has an income which is sufficient to meet their basic needs for food, shelter, heat and clothing, and live with dignity, regardless of their work status. It has the potential to prevent poverty and to help individuals and families deal with insecurity and setbacks when they most need it.

From a public health perspective, we know that people with lower incomes experience poorer health. In Canada, people living in poverty have a shortened life expectancy, as well as higher rates of chronic disease, and less access to the broader determinants of health such as housing, food security and education. For children living in poverty there are special concerns of lower birth weights, poorer developmental outcomes, reduced school success, and increased rates of illness and injury.

The cost of implementing a basic income program through government transfers would be significant, but the indirect costs of poverty (e.g. in increased use of healthcare, remedial education, crime, social programs, and lost productivity) are also immense. A guaranteed income is a simpler, more transparent approach to social assistance, and extends protection to those who are currently not covered. It also promotes greater equality of opportunity. With the security of a regular basic income, people can effectively manage their own circumstances to recover from financial setbacks, illness or injury, balance shifting employment and family care needs, or choose to obtain more education, retrain, or try out new job opportunities.

Examples of a guaranteed income already exist, such as Old Age Security provided to most adults at age 65. In addition, the Guaranteed Income Supplement is provided to seniors with low income using a "negative income tax model" of basic income: the lower one's income, the greater one's benefit. Children's benefits also share similarities with Old Age Security. So, extending a basic income guarantee to all is an extension of programs like these that currently target the young and the old.

In Canada, a five-year pilot project of a basic income program was conducted in the 1970's in Dauphin, Manitoba. A retrospective evaluation of the project in 2011 found that in addition to reducing poverty,

the initiative resulted in a significant reduction in healthcare costs, an increase in high school completion rates, and fewer incidents of work-related injuries.

It is definitely time to talk seriously about this BIG idea, which has the potential to improve the quality of life for many and support the creation of healthier communities for all of us. Community members in Peterborough have recently formed a Basic Income Peterborough Network to help raise local awareness and foster public discussion of BIG.

Readers who would like to learn more about this BIG idea are invited to join me at a free community event entitled “**What’s the BIG idea? Communities can’t do it alone...**” on Monday, June 15 at Bagnani Hall, Traill College, 310 London Street at 6:30 p.m. Come and hear Rob Rainer, an Executive Team member of The BIG Push campaign for the Basic Income Network.

Anyone who would like to learn more about BIG can visit the website of Basic Income Canada Network at [www.bienCanada.ca](http://www.bienCanada.ca).

*635 words*