



Association of Advocates for Care Reform

3348 West Broadway,
Vancouver BC V6R 2B2
Tel: (604) 732-7734
Email: Info@acrbc.ca;
Website: www.acrbc.ca

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Honourable Michael de Jong
Minister of Health
Room 337, Parliament Buildings
Victoria BC V8V 1X4

Dear Hon. Michael de Jong

Re: Food and nutritional services in residential (complex) care facilities in British Columbia

We are writing to tell you that we are pleased with some of the initiatives taken this past year by two Health Authorities to improve the provision of food and nutritional services in residential care facilities in British Columbia, and to request your assistance in spreading such improvements throughout the province.

As food is one of our basic human needs, food and nutritional services in residential care has long been a matter of concern and complaint amongst residents and families alike. Food services in residential care have many challenges in addition to the standard matters that include: quality, taste, variety, flexible timing, access (e.g. snacks and beverages). These include: residents with specific dietary considerations (e.g. medical, ethnic, religious and tube feeds), the presence of dysphagia and the requirement for assisted feeding.

The significant differences between residential care facilities and acute care facilities when it comes to food and nutrition services is always important to bear in mind and often seems unacknowledged. Unlike acute care hospitals, those in residential (complex) care are - 'at home'. Their stay is measured in months and years, not days and weeks, as is more typically the case in acute care facilities. And, for many in residential care their access to food and meal

choices is solely dependent on what is provided by the facility. A fortunate few may participate in 'outings' that may include a meal or snack and some also, may be fortunate to have family or friends bring in old favourites or seasonal offerings.

This past October 2010, we were very pleased to learn that Vancouver Coastal Health has embarked on a *pilot project* to improve the food provided in some residential care facilities within their health authority – with emphasis on a more home-like approach and presentation and with more choices of food and portions.

In November 2011, the Fraser Health Authority announced that a new Vitamin D protocol would help prevent falls and fractures in their residential care facilities. The opportunity for residents of FHA residential care facilities to participate in this new protocol is apparently a first in Canada.

While we are pleased with these initiatives, we have some observations and concerns.

- Improvements are not uniform across the five Health Authorities within the Province, nor necessarily within residential care facilities within a Health Authority. And, there is no indication of any intent for improved practices or 'learnings' from initiatives to be shared (and adopted) amongst the Health Authorities in a timely manner.
- A recent swallowing-related death in a care facility within Vancouver Coastal Health has shed light on the critical need for improved resourcing and current education for residential care staff to ensure safe 'assisted feeding'. Family and friends of those in residential care have often (and widely) identified 'assisted feeding' practices as a major source of concern.

Now, that those entering care are increasingly aged and ill, assisted feeding and swallowing concerns will likely become even more common. Speech-Language Pathologists, the specialists in dysphagia (swallowing dysfunction) are needed, more than ever before, as active members of the health care team in residential care in British Columbia.

In addition current training on assisted feeding and recognition of distress in swallowing should be available for family members and friends of residents who help with assisted feeding.

We would like to acknowledge the steps taken by the Health Authorities and encourage their continuing improvement of food and nutritional services, as well as the general dining experience in residential care facilities in British Columbia.

In closing, we request that the Ministry of Health provide specific direction and support to the Health Authorities to hasten the improvement of food and nutritional services within all residential care facilities in BC. This is needed to ensure current 'best practices' and to support the inclusion of Speech-Language Pathologists as integral members of the residential (complex care) health care team.

We look forward to the day when the residents of all care facilities in British Columbia, regardless of the Health Authority, have access to the most current evidence-based 'best practices' of food and nutritional services in residential (complex) care.

And, we look forward to hearing of the steps you will take as the Minister of Health to help make this happen in British Columbia.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Kathleen Hamilton,
President, ACR

Cc: CEO Vancouver Coastal Health Authority
CEO Fraser Health Authority
CEO Vancouver Island Health Authority
CEO Interior Health Authority
CEO Northern Health Authority
Hon. Katrine Conroy, Opposition Critic for seniors and long term care
Hon. Mike Farnsworth, Opposition Critic for Health
Kim Carter, BC Ombudsperson