

Speech at Conference on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

Premier Gordon Campbell

September 28, 2003

Check Against Delivery

I'm very pleased to be here. The work that you're doing is truly exceptional, and we recognize that the ideas and work that come from communities really create the cement that holds us together as a province.

Anne Price has really put Burns Lake and all of you on the map, in British Columbia and our country, with the work that she's done on fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Anne, I want to say thank you for your leadership and your commitment. You've just done a spectacular job.

This work has really started to have the kind of results we're looking for, right across the country. At the first Western Premiers' Conference I attended, we talked about fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

The College of New Caledonia and the community service providers here have been equally important in pulling together a cohesive response for all of us in the province to emulate.

You know, better than most people do, that fetal alcohol spectrum disorder has devastating impacts on thousands of lives. When up to 320 children are born every year that have some form of the disorder, we know it will have a huge ripple effect throughout our society and our communities.

It's a challenge for each of us. It starts with education, with providing people with information, and then it requires each of us to make the kind of commitment necessary — both personal and institutional — to work toward solutions.

There are financial costs, obviously, in our not dealing with this challenge. Often, we use financial costs as shorthand for emotional, personal and community costs. The costs in human potential are ones we'll never be able to measure. We'll never know what would have happened had we dealt with this more effectively and much earlier.

It's hard to believe that the fetal alcohol spectrum disorder went unreported just 30 years ago in our country, even though it was already having an impact.

Looking ahead, one of our challenges is to try to ensure that we learn from people's experiences, finding out where we've been successful and building on those successes in a way that we can share with others. Here in Burns Lake and the Lake District, as Anne has mentioned, your education of yourselves and your community is something we can all learn from, equally, across the province.

I asked Linda Reid to take on the challenge of being Minister of State for Early Childhood Development, because we knew that too often, we deal with problems late in life, as opposed to early in life. If we deal with problems early on, we eliminate an awful lot of future challenges.

It's easier said than done. But if you change institutions' perspectives, you change the way they look at challenges.

Last year we dedicated \$20 million to an early childhood development fund, \$5 million of which we targeted to communities with high risk of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

Those resources are in place – but we know we have to do more. We know we have to learn more, to understand not just what we should do, but how to do it.

You have an opportunity to share what you think will make a difference. You are all going to receive our fetal alcohol spectrum disorder strategic plan.

It's our first effort to try and put this together. We need you to look at it as a dynamic, living document – one that expands, grows and changes as your knowledge expands and grows and changes.

You've just heard from the panel about their experiences. Each of those experiences may, in fact, alter this plan.

Nevertheless, we need a plan – one we hopefully can build on so we're reinforcing the actions of our communities and our government.

Today, nine provincial and three federal ministries are involved with FASD and its impacts. As you may know, it's sometimes difficult to get one ministry to talk to another, to make sure they're working together.

As we move forward, we're reaching out to our First Nations communities and asking them to join us. There are dozens of First Nations communities across the province that are struggling and wrestling with dealing with these issues.

There are six specific principles that we believe effectively reduce FASD: health promotion and awareness, early identification of women at risk, targeted intervention for high-risk cases, primary diagnosis and assessments, comprehensive support to children that are affected, and ongoing co-ordination of community, provincial and federal services.

Our challenge now is to develop programs and responses that reflect those principles. By working more closely, I believe we can co-ordinate federal and provincial grant programs so that they're more effective and better focused on community projects. We can expand our diagnostic and assessment capabilities at provincial, regional and aboriginal-community levels. We can train more physicians and health professionals. We can provide more educational resources, and we can promote community pre-natal programs.

Ultimately, though, we need the people behind these efforts – the caregivers and the professionals. One of our goals is to support those who are working with these programs.

It's easy for us to talk about education. There's an awful lot that's already known about FASD, and there's much that we have to learn, but we have to find a way to take that information and make it a practical part of people's lives.

Here's a little lesson I learned early on from Linda:

We're used to saying to women who are pregnant that they shouldn't drink. That's an important message. In some cases, it's difficult to get through to people, but the message has started to make some headway.

But there's actually an equally important message: you shouldn't drink if you're trying to get pregnant. I think it's important to recognize that fetal alcohol spectrum disorder can start doing its damage from the very moment a woman becomes pregnant.

Now, that's a big shift for people. Just as they're getting used to the first message, we're trying to give them a second message. It's important for all of us to think about how we can do that effectively.

There's no single thing that will actually solve this problem for good. If there was, we would have done it by now. And I want to reaffirm that we recognize FASD remains a huge problem.

At the Western Premiers' Conference, premiers from all seven western jurisdictions come together. There hasn't been one where we haven't discussed fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and how we're trying to respond.

The issue for us now is to develop the kind of community delivery systems that work, because it's no use discussing it as premiers if we don't get it down to the community level.

One of the most successful programs is the Healthier Babies, Brighter Futures program. It was created here. You created it, right here in Burns Lake because of your leadership and your decision not to wait.

Not waiting makes a difference. The percentage of women, in the program, accepting pre-natal care went from 16 per cent to 100 per cent. That's a huge success, and it's something you can celebrate: 86 per cent significantly reduced their alcohol and drug use, and 94 per cent of their babies had healthy birth weights.

That's a great accomplishment. That is an enormous tribute to your effort.

We want to be sure that kind of leadership is shared with other communities and, indeed, across the country. We'd like to be able to replicate your success provincewide.

As a first step, we're setting aside \$400,000 this year to support continued planning across government to further the priorities we've identified.

Our goal is a continued partnership – with each of you, with the community service agencies that deliver the services, with colleges like New Caledonia and others across the province, and with citizens — because with them, we will find answers and succeed.

On that note, I want to thank all of you for being here this weekend, and all the families who have struggled through their challenges to become examples of success.

In particular, I want to honour five outstanding Burns Lake citizens for their courage and their dedication towards improving the lives of people with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

First, Anne Price. Anne was a critical part of the team that moved FASD action to the forefront 12 years ago, in Burns Lake, in her initial role as College of New Caledonia's family plan co-ordinator. She led research and recruitment towards FASD workshops. Programs like Healthier Babies, Brighter Futures have received national recognition, and Anne, this is Linda's and my way of saying thank you very much. Thank you.

We'd also like to recognize Cathy Ashurst. Now regional manager of Lake District campus, she was a key part of mobilizing the community at the college, since 1984, in various roles, including teaching, program development, counseling and management. Cathy and her team are known for building the college's successful community-based learner centre programs in the area of FASD. Cathy, thank you very much.

Doloris Storness-Bliss began teaching primary and elementary children in the mid-70s before moving to the College of New Caledonia's family centre programming. She encouraged the first FASD workshops at the college and now keeps the community healthy, as owner-operator of a local health-food store. Thank you very much.

Lynn Synotte first came to the college in 1990. She currently works in campus public relations as an industry, business and First Nations liaison. Over the years, Lynn's development team has provided the community and the campus with many family-oriented services. Lynn, thank you very much.

Peter Oulette has 20 years' experience developing and delivering educational programs throughout northern British Columbia. He was on the college's faculty 12 years ago. He's been a leader in designing programs, courses and teaching strategies to assist adults with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Peter, thank you very much.