

# OVERHAUL OF ONTARIO'S AUTISM PLAN NEEDED

If you read no further than its self-congratulatory press release, the Ontario government's plan for helping autistic children and their families looks like an enormous advance in a great humanitarian cause.

Nearly three times as many children will receive funding for life-changing therapy than is now the case and within 18 months the horrendous wait lines for intervention will vanish, the government promises. What's not to like?

It turns out there's a lot. If you go beyond the press release and inspect the plan's full details, you'll see it's filled with gaping holes. The biggest one is that in order to help more children, this government will actually reduce its assistance for others.

To be sure, what this government is trying to achieve is laudable. A developmental disorder characterized by difficulties with communication and social interaction, autism presents a huge challenge for - and places enormous pressures on - thousands of Ontario families.

While an estimated 40,000 children in Ontario have autism, only 8,400 currently receive services while 23,000 are languishing on the wait list for behavioural therapies. At least 2,400 children are waiting simply for a diagnosis.

Those numbers are scandalous. The status quo is unacceptable in the kind of compassionate society Ontario claims to be. At the very least, Children, Community and Social Services Minister Lisa MacLeod deserves high marks for tackling this embarrassment.

MacLeod's solution is to provide the funding for therapy directly to parents and let them choose how the money's spent. Her hope is that this will clear the enormous backlog of autistic children awaiting help. Considering that early therapy can be hugely beneficial and even save money down the road if that timely intervention reduces the need for future assistance, there's wisdom in her approach.

Where the plan rightly starts raising alarms is its budget for therapy. It isn't budging. It stands at \$325 million this year and that's exactly where it will remain.

This means the government intends to distribute the same amount of money for therapy programs to a substantially larger group of people. The same-sized pie will be sliced into more, smaller pieces. Moreover, by shifting the focus to early intervention for young children, this government is to a degree providing support on the basis of age, not need.

Young children on the low end of the autism spectrum will receive as much government assistance as older children with far greater needs; perhaps even more. No wonder many parents of autistic children have denounced the PC plan.

We concede the government faces the formidable task of improving services while eliminating the provincial deficit and not raising taxes. Where does the public expect them to find even more money for autistic therapy?

That said, this government has come up with a deeply-flawed solution to a very complex problem. It should heed its critics and overhaul its own overhaul of autism services.

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OPINION

## KNOW PNEUMONIA SYMPTOMS IN PETS

### ASPIRATION PNEUMONIA MORE COMMON IN DOGS THAN CATS, WRITES BARRY BURTIS



**BARRY BURTIS**  
Column

Pneumonia is an illness that most people recognize as a serious lung infection.

In fact, pneumonia is not a specific term and really just means inflammation in the deep lung tissues, where oxygen is absorbed into the body and waste gases are expelled. There are many possible causes of pneumonia, a potential life-threatening disease.

Most commonly, in animals, pneumonia can be caused by infectious agents (viruses, bacteria, fungi, or even worms). It can also occur as a result chemical in-

halation, smoke inhalation or the aspiration of material, usually vomited or regurgitated food, into the lungs.

Conditions that predispose to aspiration pneumonia include sedation, endotracheal intubation, mechanical ventilation, esophageal or neuromuscular paralysis, esophageal disease, vomiting, laryngeal disease, neurologic disorders, force feeding, inhalation of foreign material, and gastric overdistention.

Aspiration pneumonia is more common in dogs than cats.

The most common signs of pneumonia, regardless of the cause, include coughing, nasal discharge, lethargy, loss of appetite, weakness, difficulty breathing, fever and exercise intolerance.

A diagnosis of aspiration pneumonia, as with other types of pneumonia, will require a physical examination, laboratory tests, chest X-rays and pos-

sible other testing. Treatment with antibiotics, supportive therapies, including oxygen administration and other measures, may be required.

Recently, a research study has shed some new light on dog breeds that are more likely to suffer from aspiration pneumonia.

These studies had found that brachycephalic breeds (those with a broad, short skull) did not appear more likely to develop aspiration pneumonia. However, with the increasing popularity of various brachycephalic breeds - in particular, English bulldogs, French bulldogs and pugs - a new study was designed.

Medical records (80,137 records) from a large referral veterinary hospital were reviewed from 2006-15. Records with a diagnosis of aspiration pneumonia were further evaluated.

*Barry Burtis is a local, retired, companion-animal veterinarian.*

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