



# Grin and bear it

## **An update on what happened to that extra public health funding the BC government promised** *by Ross Harvey*

**BC** Health Minister George Abbott must be a fan of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

Like that famous book's Cheshire Cat, Abbott's November 2005 promise of new HIV/AIDS funding as part of a larger \$60 million public health initiative has slowly diminished until almost nothing is left but his smile.

Abbott had insisted in a 2005 speech that "HIV/AIDS organizations play an important role" in helping the government deal with the challenge of HIV/AIDS, and the \$60 million had been added "for health authorities to work with AIDS organizations to assist the government in meeting the goals of its *Priorities for Action in Managing the Epidemic*. Abbott was careful to add, "The \$60 million is for public health, not just for AIDS, but AIDS is an important part of it."

How important? As previously noted in "No cash flow" in the November/December 2006 issue of *living* ☉, Fraser Health reported that, of the \$1,874,000 it initially received, \$200,000 went to new funding for Surrey HIV/AIDS Society. An additional \$150,000 was slated in 2006/07 for public health nursing within the Fraser Health bureaucracy to develop an HIV/AIDS case management system. Interior Health declared that existing contracts with AIDS organizations were unaffected, and no new contracts were awarded upon receiving its first \$1,199,000 share.

Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA)—which funds the BCPWA Society, among others—wrote that their preliminary \$622,000 share was allocated to support West Nile virus, environmental health, and lab surveillance, and that funds have been directed to the PHSA laboratories and BC Centre for Disease Control to support these initiatives. Nothing was directed to HIV/AIDS organizations.

Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA) reported that it used \$350,000 of its \$1,568,000 initial share to make a one-time contribution to AIDS Vancouver Island (AVI), Vancouver Island Persons Living with HIV/AIDS, Victoria AIDS Respite Care Society (VARCS), and one other unidentified organization. Yet ironically, earlier this year VIHA announced it was now going to cut funding to agencies like AVI and VARCS by up to \$450,000.

Since this information was received last year, BCPWA has heard from the remaining two health authorities. Vancouver Coastal Health reported that, of its first \$2,305,000, "none of this funding has gone directly to AIDS programs. None of the contracted agencies working with AIDS patients in our region have received any of this money either."

Northern Health, which received a \$431,000 initial share, reported that it had directed an additional \$40,000 to Positive Living Northwest in Smithers

and \$180,000 to Positive Living North in Prince George. As well, \$73,000 went towards increasing capacity in the AIDS prevention programs, dedicating public staff to HIV/AIDS work, supporting an Aboriginal Leaders forum, training for Aboriginal nurses in testing and pre- and post-test counselling, support to the regional Aboriginal Task Group on HIV/AIDS, education of physicians, and conducting community readiness assessments. This appears to be the best record of any of the health authorities.

The bottom line? The most generous possible interpretation is that, of Mr. Abbott's initial \$8 million disbursement for new public health initiatives, roughly \$843,000 went to new or enhanced HIV/AIDS work. A bit more than 10 percent. Three of the six health authorities spent nothing on new or improved HIV/AIDS work. Worst of all, one of the health authorities that did advance new money appears ready now to claw back an even greater sum.

Which leaves Abbott's cheery contention that "AIDS is an important part" of public health sounding very hollow indeed. Reminiscent of that last, lingering, mocking smile. ☉

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