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Reports focus on the health of Toronto's young children

Dr. David McKeown, Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, presented reports today to the Board of Health focusing on child health in Toronto. Two reports summarize current information on the health of Toronto's children, another examines the links between periodontal disease and birth outcomes and a fourth study calls for action to address food security and the impact on early child development.

Dr. McKeown said the reports are intended to promote healthy public policy. "The health of young children is influenced by multiple, interacting determinants that affect children directly or through their families, neighborhoods and social and physical environments. There are many challenges in promoting positive early childhood experiences for all, but the long-term benefits make it sensible to take action now."

Key indicators of child health in Toronto include the following highlights:

- there has been a steady increase in the proportion of mothers giving birth after age 35; more babies are being born to women over 40 than to women under 20
- many children live with major family change, as one in four experience parental separation before age six
- 57% of young children in lone parent households live in poverty, 64% of young children in families headed by parents under 25 live in poverty
- in a 2003 survey, parents in low income households were three times more likely to report poorer health of their children; parents not born in Canada were twice as likely to report poorer health
- in 2001, almost two thirds of babies in Toronto were born to women born outside of Canada; more than 30,000 babies born in 2003
- Toronto's low birth weight rate is significantly higher than the Ontario rate (5.2% compared to 4% in 2001); this rate varies across the city with much higher rates found in the north west and east regions of Toronto
- although 90% of mothers breastfeed their infants after birth, only 20% are exclusively breastfeeding after six months

Dr. McKeown made a number of recommendations to address the issues raised in the reports, including: to the Minister of Health and Long Term Care to improve data collection and develop indicators to measure child health determinants and outcomes; to the Public Health Agency of Canada to develop indicators to promote healthy breastfeeding standards; and to collaborate with key stakeholders to address disparities in low birth weight across Toronto.

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The report on periodontal disease summarized the evidence of the potential links between adverse health outcomes such as low birth weight and poor oral health of pregnant women. The report outlines strategies for continuing to monitor this issue and recommends to the provincial government that pregnant women eligible for social assistance be entitled to receive basic dental services, instead of only emergency care as currently provided.

The fourth report examines the impact on households with young children who live with issues of food insecurity. In a 2003 survey of 1,000 Toronto households, one in six experienced at least one indicator of children's food insecurity related to household income. Almost one in five lower income households reported not being able to provide their children a balanced meal during the past year.

The report recommends a number of actions, including that the Minister of Children and Youth Services integrate food security activities into Ontario's Best Start strategy and that work be undertaken to develop a Canadian Children's Food Bill.

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