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Inaction on syphilis is putting babies at risk

Edmonton – Official Opposition Leader David Swann says that the Stelmach administration is responsible for Alberta's skyrocketing syphilis rate, and that their newly released report on the situation is wholly inadequate to eradicating the disease in Alberta.

"There are thirteen confirmed and suspected cases of babies with syphilis in Alberta, and one in all the rest of Canada," Swann says. "It's like Alberta is trapped in the dark ages when it comes to this disease."

Forty percent of babies with syphilis die during or shortly after birth. The survivors often suffer serious long-term physical and mental disabilities.

The Syphilis Outbreak in Alberta, drafted early this spring but released just before Christmas in the hopes of burying the story in the holiday rush, offers no budget, nor a timeframe for action. Continued confusion over the role of Alberta Health Services and the Ministry of Health and Wellness has delayed action to curb syphilis.

Swann says that front-line professionals are not to blame; rather, responsibility lies with the lack of leadership from the Stelmach administration and the failed experiment of centralized control of health care delivery via Alberta Health Services.

"This is another major failure of the Stelmach administration's management of public health," Swann says. "Innocent babies are dying or being left permanently disabled. This should be a top priority for the Premier, but he has allowed this report to be quietly swept under the carpet. It's shameful."

Swann is concerned that the Stelmach administration hasn't taken the problem seriously because the syphilis cases were initially confined to vulnerable Albertans – aboriginals, the poor, people with addictions and sex trade workers. But because of government inaction (many of the report's recommendations had been made to the government as early as 2007) the disease has spread outside these vulnerable groups.

"If the initial victims weren't from disadvantaged groups, would this government have acted faster?" Swann asks. "It's shortsighted to ignore problems like this, because they spread. Thirteen cases in 2010 could be thirty cases in 2011, and who knows how many in 2012. On top of all our other problems in public health, we cannot afford to add a catastrophic syphilis epidemic."

Swann says that the government should immediately determine who is in charge of the battle against syphilis and give that person a staff and budget for the fight, with timelines for reducing the disease to 1999 levels.

The Alberta Liberal Caucus... There's a better way.

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