



Defending refugee claimant rights: Defending our core Canadian values

IN DECEMBER, RNAO WAS GRANTED intervener status in an appeal that will determine whether changes to federal health-care funding for refugee claimants are legal. Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced modifications to the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) in 2012 that effectively left refugee claimants and their families without access to primary care. In 2014, the federal government's changes were deemed by a federal judge to be "cruel and unusual" treatment that could potentially put "lives at risk."

Allowing refugees access to health care goes to the very core of our country's social fabric. RNAO and its members have adamantly advocated for health care as a basic human right. Denying an individual that right – based solely on their status in this country and not on their need for care – is a violation that RNAO has fought to reverse since the changes to IFHP came into effect almost three years ago.

Our courageous, values-driven, and evidence-based advocacy has paid off. Intervener status at the Federal Court of Appeal is a true reflection of what it means to take on an issue, and to stick with it until we see success. I am so proud of RNAO's members and board for our clear moral compass, unending passion for justice, and commitment to reverse this inhumane government decision.

Members began contacting RNAO when they became

aware of the changes to IFHP, and started to see first-hand the effects the cuts were having on their patients. On the pages of this *Journal*, we featured your stories about patients who were being denied: prenatal care; diabetes, asthma, epileptic or psychiatric medications; monitoring for heart disease; specialist care for sickle cell anemia; mental health care; and more (see *Sept/Oct 2012, New country, no care*).

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RNs, NPs and nursing students are incensed by the federal government's claim the changes to IFHP will save money. As nurses, we know preventive care is less expensive than acute and urgent care. Indeed, a study released last year by Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) substantiated this fact with telling statistics that show, before the government cuts, only 6.4 per cent of refugee children visiting the SickKids ER had to be admitted. After the cuts, the admission rate doubled to 12 per cent.

People who have escaped war, starvation, torture, and other

forms of persecution come to Canada in search of hope and opportunity. If they are refused health care, we are not easing their suffering. The anger at seeing refugee claimants being treated as second-class citizens is palpable in the nursing community and beyond. And that's what prompted so many of us to join forces with other concerned citizens to vocally oppose the changes at rallies and days-of-action across the

government launched the *Ontario Temporary Health Program (OTHP)* to provide primary care, acute care and some medical coverage for select refugee claimants. Kudos to then Health Minister Deb Matthews, who thanked RNAO and nurses for their advocacy, suggesting the provincial government felt just as strongly as nurses that denying health care to refugees was not the right thing to do.

In November 2014, the federal government was forced to backtrack after Justice Anne Mactavish struck down the changes to IFHP four months earlier. The prime minister appealed Mactavish's July ruling, and that's why RNAO teamed up with the Canadian Association of Community Health Centres (CACHC) to apply for intervener status.

I thank you all for your unwavering advocacy on this issue. Without it, the views of nurses would not be heard in the legal arguments that will be presented before the court by RNAO-CACHC legal counsel Rahool Agarwal and his team.

We may not know exactly when the Federal Court of Appeal will hear this case, but I have every confidence the vindictive and counter-productive action of the federal government against refugee claimants will be exposed for what it really is: an affront to Canadian values. **RN**

province and the country.

Close to 3,000 of you joined RNAO by sending letters to Prime Minister Harper. RNAO issued media releases and action alerts to persuade him to change his mind. We brought a resolution to the Canadian Nurses Association that was unanimously passed in June 2012. And we joined forces with other health professionals who had their own front-line stories about how the changes were having a negative impact on patients and families.

Ontario refugees' rights were partially restored in January 2014, when the provincial

DORIS GRINSPUN, RN, MSN, PhD, LLD (HON), O.ONT, IS CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF RNAO.