

## MDs slam 2% welfare increase

By Matthew Sylvain

TORONTO | Social-activist physicians have shot down an Ontario budget pledge to increase welfare rates by 2%, arguing money not spent by the ministry of social services will be spent by the health ministry.

In the March budget, the Liberals under Premier Dalton McGuinty said they would push up the basic "work" and disability rates by about \$25 or less a month.

Before the budget announcement, a single person collecting "work" program benefits received \$536 a month; a disability benefit collector received \$959 a month.

Health Providers Against Poverty, a lobby group, called the 2% increase "ridiculous."

In a press release, Dr. Gary Bloch, a member of the group and a downtown Toronto family doctor, said welfare recipients' health is compromised by their extreme poverty. "When will governments start paying for an ounce of prevention rather than a pound of cure?" he said.

Meanwhile, the Ontario Medical Association (OMA) welcomed the provincial government's budget commitment to a comprehensive health human-resource strategy. The strategy, as disclosed in the budget, reinforces a position first articulated in a policy paper quietly released at the end of 2005. The strategy will "ensure the province has the right supply and mix of health professionals," the government said in the budget.

In a statement, the OMA said it was "committed to participating in the development of that strategy and called for the retention of physicians in Ontario to be a priority."

The budget contained \$1.9 billion in additional health-care spending for 2006/07; provincial medicare spending now totals \$35.4 billion in Ontario, or 46 cents of every \$1 spent on programs by the government.