

# Leadership is key to disease prevention

BY BARBARA KAMINSKY, SPECIAL TO THE SUN JANUARY 17, 2011

This year promises to be a lively one in B.C. politics. Some will see this as entertainment. Others will tune it out completely, but for those who care about the future of our province it presents a unique opportunity to discuss our collective values and goals.

Of the things valued by British Columbians, health care consistently tops the polls. With an aging population and rising chronic disease rates, our next leaders should be considering what it will take to sustain B.C.'s health care system and high quality of life.

Total health spending is projected to reach \$17.9 billion or 42 per cent of all government expenditures by 2013. Chronic diseases such as cancer, diabetes, and heart and lung disease consume the largest proportion of health care costs and are the largest causes of death and disability in the province.

At present, the 34 per cent of the population with one or more chronic diseases consume 80 per cent of the costs of Pharmacare, physician payments and acute (hospital) costs. With chronic diseases anticipated to increase by 58 per cent over the next 25 years, it is clear that to sustain the health care system, we need to do more disease prevention.

There is, however, a silver lining. Eighty per cent of heart disease and 50 per cent of cancers can be prevented. It is obvious: If we want to address chronic diseases, we need to find ways that all British Columbians can live healthier lives. Yet it is not as simple as telling people to get fit, eat well and quit smoking. Those messages help, but do nothing to overcome the real barriers faced by those with the poorest health and greatest risk for disease. Supportive environments are also required.

There is significant research that confirms that British Columbians who are disadvantaged have both an increased susceptibility to, and are more likely to be living with chronic disease. Chronic diseases arising from social and economic inequities are also a costly economic drain in terms of lost productivity, forgone tax revenue, reduced consumer spending and higher public expenditures.

The view of the B.C. Healthy Living Alliance (BCHLA) is that chronic disease prevention requires a range of responses including a long-term strategic plan, as well as regulatory measures and policies that can be implemented in the short-term.

BCHLA urges the prospective leaders of all political parties in British Columbia to commit to the development of a comprehensive, cross-government plan with specific targets to address the inequities that contribute to chronic disease.

Some measures will require coordination with other levels of government, the private sector and non-profit partners. There are opportunities to work with municipalities to revitalize aging recreational facilities and promote smoke-free housing. Provincial leaders should be urging the federal government to limit the marketing of unhealthy foods to children.

