

Rights versus parental consent in health care controversy

by Emily Hobbs

Some Strait Regional School Board members are concerned that children's rights may be violated if parental consent is required for accessing youth health centres in this region's schools.

Discussions at the board's working committee meeting March 15 once again led to the controversial youth health centre issue because of a recent appeal to the board on behalf of the Antigonish Catholic Civil Rights League.

At the regular monthly meeting March 8, CCRL president Sandy MacDonald stressed his organization's concerns that "the health clinics will become the pawns of special interest groups who are given free office space in order to promote values and beliefs directly contrary to those of parents, religious and ethnic groups." MacDonald said he feels the solution is written permission slips from parents be required if a student wants to use the centre.

North Inverness member Brenda Gillis was adamant in her opposition to students having to seek their parent's permission to use the health centres.

"There are issues where perhaps the child is dealing with a difficult situation at home. Perhaps the parent is using drugs or there is alcoholism or the student could be sexually, emotionally or physically abused by parents," Gillis said. "So if the parent doesn't want the child to seek support and has the right to say so, then the child is not going to get the help that they need."

Gillis said the board has the responsibility to protect young people's rights and suggested the board seek legal advice about the age of consent

for clinical treatment.

"The Department of Health has its own guidelines with age of consent and I think parents need to be given that information so they'll go in with a clearer understanding about what the students are allowed to do and at what age can they seek services without parental input," she said.

Jack Beaton, director of student programs and services informed the board that the strategy used by some schools in the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School board is to have parents contact the school's principal if they do not want their child to access the health centre.

Gillis says she worries about the rights of the students in that situation and would not like to see a strategy such as that used in the Strait region.

"I see the rights of the students being violated by the Cape Breton board," Gillis said. "Maybe the parents are the problem, maybe there is abuse or incest. This is about the rights of the children."

Pam Cotton, East Richmond, shared Gillis's concerns.

"Think of the young boys being abused by the priests years ago," Cotton said. "Perhaps if those boys had somewhere to go, it wouldn't have gone on as long as it did."

East Antigonish member Frank Machnik expressed his opinion that the board was not given all the information in the original presentation and appeal for the board's support of youth health centres, specifically concerning the frequency contraception services are accessed through the centres.

"My concern is transparency. In the presentation there is no reference

to the contraception services that are offered to the children," Machnik said. "My concern is that parents have to be part of the process and in giving these presentations, let's be given all the goods."

Beaton reassured the board that clinical procedures are referred out of the health centres.

"There is a great over emphasis on human sexuality here," Beaton said. "Birth control and abortion go through rigorous referral processes.

The health centre is the starting point for referral to the medical profession. Kids are concerned about bullying, depression, bereavement. Yes, they are concerned about dating and birth control, but that's not the only issue that is dealt with."

Beaton reminded the board that according to the department of health that high school students are legally entitled to access health care without their parents consent.

"An 'informed minor,' is a 14-

year-old and they are entitled to confidentiality," Beaton said. "We can set policy and expectations, but at the end of the day, you are dealing with youth accessing the health care system."

The youth health care centres are partnerships between the Department of Health and the schools and communities they serve.

The Strait board passed a motion Feb. 2 to support youth health centres in high schools in the region.

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