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# Therapy for autism

**T**HE Supreme Court of Canada made the correct decision Friday, ruling it could not intrude on provincial jurisdiction over what health services should be publicly funded. That disappointed a group of British Columbia parents who say autistic children have a right to publicly paid behavioural therapy, believed to be their best shot at a normal life. The Supreme Court found nothing in the federal Canada Health Act compels the provinces to provide anything beyond the "core services" delivered by medical practitioners.

In effect, the court's decision means behavioural therapy for autistic children is regarded like any



one of the numerous additional health services — speech therapy, for example — that are provided, or not, at a province's discretion. In this, the court was right not to interpret more than is allowed within the federal government's Canada Health Act. The health act does stipulate that the medically insured services are available universally, that no one will be discriminated against

because of age, income or health status. But it does not list the insured services; the decision on what's in that basket is left to the provinces. This is why across Canada insured services vary, sometimes from year to year.

The parents might have had better luck focusing their efforts and resources at rallying the public behind their plight, because it is political pressure that expands the list of medically insured services, which can be wholly or partially funded. Autism is a profound neurological disorder that affects language and communication skills, locking the children into a mysterious and isolated world of their own. Intensive therapy (as much as 40 hours each week) delivered by those trained in applied behavioural analysis — one-on-one intervention that costs \$50,000 or more each year per child — has the increasing but not universal confidence of the academic scientific community. There have been small, but unreplicated, controlled experiments indicating ABA's success. In Manitoba, where it is estimated 70 children each year are diagnosed autistic, ABA programs are made available to about 30 children at the St. Amant Centre. Manitoba spends less than \$2 million each year on therapy for autistic children; Ontario, by comparison, spends almost \$80 million.

Parents of autistic children across the country were hopeful the B.C. challenge would succeed because the Supreme Court's opinion has national application. Manitoba has no legal necessity to improve the limited financial assistance now offered. The province's solution to fund therapy for a fraction of autistic children suggests it accepts its usefulness, but is unprepared to shoulder the potential cost of a more robust program. This is unfair to the many who are told each year they will get no financial help. Health Minister Tim Sale should ask for the best information available on the efficacy of ABA. If convinced, Mr. Sale should establish a better financing scheme, perhaps through partial or co-payments, so therapy would be affordable to more families with autistic children.