

ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND REGULATION OF COUNSELLING THERAPISTS

S. Furstenau: Everyone deserves access to mental health care, not just those who can afford it. The gaps in our current system could be partially met by expanding to a broader range of mental health professionals. Unfortunately, unlike most of the rest of Canada, counsellors and therapists are unregulated in this province. Immediately regulating counselling therapists is a step to meeting the demand for mental health services in B.C.

When the Federation of Associations for Counselling Therapists in B.C. applied to be regulated this February, the Minister of Health said no. In the midst of a growing mental health crisis, the opportunity to provide better care was rejected. Regulation of counsellors would protect the public. It would make sure people are receiving qualified and competent care, and it would open the door for more mental health care professionals to be covered under health insurance and MSP, ultimately removing the financial barrier that exists for far too many people in B.C. right now.

My question is to the Minister of Health. Why was this application by the Federation of Associations for Counselling Therapists in B.C. rejected?

Hon. A. Dix: Well, there are a number of things the member left out. The member will recall that she and myself and the Member for Kelowna–Lake Country have provided a report and a recommendation for changes to the way we regulate health professions in British Columbia, including means to allow new professions to become regulated. It's not just counsellors. She will know because she saw the same thousands of briefs that I did and took part in the same unanimous report that we put together that other professions are looking to be regulated, as well. We have presented, and we'll be putting in place the most extensive reform of health professional regulation in the country, one that will improve health regulation across jurisdictions. To make significant changes based on the current process when all of us, including the member, have proposed significant changes, I think, is not the right approach.

We are making changes recommended by the member, by the official opposition, and by myself, changes that will make it easier for new professions to become regulated and will increase standards, increase public transparency, increase accountability of health professional organizations and make the whole process more efficient and better for the public interest. That's what we're doing. That's what we are putting in place.

The member, of course, knows this because she was part of it. She played a very important role in that. She advocated in that period, for example, on issues around social workers that were reflected in her bill that she introduced yesterday, as well.

This is an area the government is taking action on, but we're not doing it in the old way. We're doing it by working with the member and with the official opposition to bring fundamental change that will improve health regulation in B.C. I'm very proud of those efforts, and I hope the member is, as well.

Mr. Speaker: Leader of the Third Party on a supplemental.

S. Furstenau: Indeed I am also very proud of those efforts, which were an example of the kind of collaboration that we need to see more of in this Legislature.

Unfortunately, what the minister is speaking of — and I agree that the modernization of health regulation around health professionals, as recommended by the collaborative efforts of the three parties needs to go forward.... But, at the same time, we are in a global pandemic that has behind it, and already unfolding now, another pandemic and that is a mental health pandemic.

[10:40 a.m.]

So just as we were nimble in responding to COVID-19 in this House over a year ago, I think we need to be nimble in responding to the growing need for people to have access to

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unfolding, now, another pandemic, and that is a mental health pandemic. So just as we were nimble in responding to COVID-19 in this House over a year ago, I think we need to be nimble in responding to the growing need for people to have access to mental health care when they need it, and for that health care to be trustworthy, to have accountability and to ensure that public safety is incorporated into that.

So the most effective and direct route to do that is to ensure that we have regulation of counsellors and counselling therapists in British Columbia, which currently, we do not, which means that anybody can call themselves a counsellor. There's no regulatory body that the public can check in with and say: "Is this accurate? Can I trust this person?" I think we all agree that we need to expand mental health care to everybody in this province.

What I'm asking the minister is that just as he's had to be incredibly nimble for the last 16 months responding to the pandemic of COVID-19.... I think it's time to be nimble to respond to the pandemic of mental health crises that we have in British Columbia. My question is: can we expect to see the urgency and the nimbleness that we need to see and see the regulation of counsellors in this province happen immediately?

Hon. A. Dix: Well, I think you see that urgency in the actions of my colleague the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions every day, the efforts of the government to expand mental health and addictions services every day, efforts that I think we all support in this House, and we're all working together in this House.

The reason that we undertook a fundamental review of health professional regulations.... One of the reasons was the challenge that many professions — not just counsellors, but many professions — were having in being regulated, and the proliferation of health professional bodies that were not sufficiently affected. We came together to put in place a fundamental change, and it's one we're proceeding on and implementing.

The member, I think, understands very well, because again, she saw the same thousands of briefs. We spent hours together working on these issues and coming up with the unanimous recommendations on the very issues she's asking questions about. I think the pathway forward here is to implement those changes, which will allow much more quick recognition of new professional bodies within the six recommended health professional bodies we've recommended in that document. That's the way forward.

The creation of health professional bodies is not a matter of ministerial fiat, but one that requires us to go step by step in the creation of self-regulating bodies that make sense. This is particularly true in the area of counsellors, which, as the member will know — again, because we saw the same mini-briefs — represent a whole bunch of different professions with people with different

qualifications who call themselves counsellors, making it much more challenging than, say, the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

That said, we're working forward, we're moving forward with urgency on these questions, and we'll continue to do so.

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