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Poor child health trends reversible, say advocates

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) has urged all political parties to take heed of the Paediatric Society's latest report into childhood diseases. The trends are alarming, but the report shows they have easily identifiable causes and can be fixed with the right policies.

The report paints a picture of entrenched poverty in New Zealand today, showing in the costs for children in illness and ongoing disadvantage.

The report clearly shows how poverty impacts on children's health, with children in low-income households far more likely to get illnesses that require admission to hospital. Many children who suffer severe infectious illnesses have their health compromised for life. As adults their ability to work and participate is affected.

Children most severely affected are those from beneficiary families, trying to cope on incomes languishing at levels set in 1991. With family assistance increasingly linked to people's ability to work, children of parents on benefits miss out and, predictably, are becoming sicker.

"There is a strong body of research showing that people's health – including children's health – is negatively affected by the sort of income gap that puts New Zealand second only to the U.S. in the OECD, says CPAG spokesperson Assoc-Prof Mike O'Brien.

"The health of children in low-income families, whether on benefits or in work, has not improved in the last four years, at best it has stopped deteriorating for some diseases. Our continued underfunding of families means we now have worse rates for some childhood diseases than Australia or the US.

"Because income is so important for these children and also their parents, we urge that future tax cuts go to where they can do the greatest good for society – to low-income families who have a real need for additional cash to pay for decent food and medical treatment," says Assoc-Prof O'Brien.

"Policy change over the past twenty years has undermined the incomes of the poorest families by allowing low wages and benefits to fall so much compared to everyone else. We can now clearly see who is paying the price from the child health data in this report.

"It's time to ask if we can really afford to ignore the fact that our child health statistics are the second worst in the OECD. There needs to be a redistribution back to children if we want them to become healthy functioning adults," O'Brien concludes.

- The report, *Monitoring the Health of New Zealand Children and Young People: Indicator Handbook* is available from the Paediatric Society through their website, www.paediatrics.org.nz