

On May 3, 2001, the Honourable John Baird, Ontario's Minister of Community and Social Services, announced his government's plan to implement addiction screening, assessment and treatment — all mandatory — for people receiving welfare benefits under the Ontario Works Act, 1997.¹ Bizarrely, the Ontario government will be ordering treatment for a medical condition that does not qualify as a disability under the companion Ontario Disability Support Program Act, 1997.² Although universal or random tests for the presence of addictive substances are not being contemplated, such testing can be or-

penalized for refusing treatment. Welfare recipients who use alcohol or drugs could easily provide the answers necessary to escape detection by the CAGE test and therefore escape mandatory assessment and treatment. The Ontario government's use of the CAGE test is an example of the state's misapplication of science for the purpose of achieving ideologically motivated social change.

Finally, the Ontario government claims that it has "given careful consideration to legal issues." Yet it is silent on the issue of patient consent. The Canadian Medical Protective Association (CMPA) has outlined the requirements for valid consent based on Canadian law.¹⁶ One element of valid consent is that it must be voluntary and, in the CMPA's phrase, "free of any suggestion of duress or coercion."

The Ontario government plans to refer welfare recipients for a compulsory "professional, comprehensive assessment" and to demand that some recipients attend outpatient programs for mandatory treatment as a condition of receiving benefits. Both diagnosis and treatment will require the involvement of physicians and both could occur under duress and coercion.

Physicians, guided by professional ethics, will need to determine whether their allegiance is to the state or to the individual patient. The Board of Trustees of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health has publicly opposed mandatory drug testing and treatment.¹⁷ Medical associations and professional regulatory bodies should follow its example and take a public stand against the Ontario government's plan to force welfare recipients to undergo screening, assessment and treatment for addiction.

Dr. Berger is Medical Director, Inner City Health Program, Core Services, and Chief, Department of Family and Community Medicine, St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto, Ont.

Competing interests: None declared.

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Correspondence to: Dr. Philip B. Berger, Department of Family and Community Medicine, St. Michael's Hospital, 30 Bond St., Toronto ON M5B 1W8

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