

Children's Rights Alliance

## **PRESS RELEASE**

14 November 2003

For Immediate Release

# **Government must keep its promise and extend the Medical Card to children living in poverty**

The Children's Rights Alliance today called on the Government to keep the promises made in the Health Strategy and the Programme for Government to extend the Medical Card to an additional 200,000 people living in poverty, with an emphasis on families with children.

"Yesterday's statement by the Minister for Health and Children suggests that the Government intends to break this promise for the third year in a row," said Raymond Dooley, Chief Executive of the Children's Rights Alliance. "This disregard for the health care rights of children living below the poverty line is unacceptable.

"We need to extend Medical Card coverage to more children because it will improve their health. Too often the decision to see the doctor or to obtain prescribed treatment is made on the basis of financial considerations. Removing the issue of affordability will eliminate a major obstacle to equal access to health care for children.

"Over two years ago, in a major report on the health of Ireland's children, the Chief Medical Officer called for the introduction of universal Medical Card coverage for children, stressing the importance of socio-economic conditions in determining the health status of children. 'The weight of evidence supports the view that children's health can be traced to social, economic and environmental conditions... Poverty is the most powerful aspect of the social context associated with ill health in children,' he maintained in his report.

"Despite the Chief Medical Officer's recommendations, and the commitments made in the Health Strategy and the Programme of Government, nothing has been done to extend the Medical Card to any additional children. As a result, families on very low incomes find themselves having to allocate up to a third or more of their weekly income to cover the cost of a visit to the GP if a child gets sick," said Dooley.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Ireland has been a State Party since 1992, says that all children have a right 'to the highest attainable standard of health.' The Convention also says that children have the right of access to health services and governments have the duty to ensure that 'no child is deprived' of this right. Budget 2004 must support

measures such as the extension of the Medical Card that reflect an understanding of our obligations under the Convention.

In its Pre-Budget Submission this year, the Alliance has also called on the Department to begin to extend the Medical Card to all children by rolling it out, on a phased basis, starting with children under the age of five.

Budget 2004 should also fully fund the commitments for children contained in the "Framework Document" accompanying the National Anti-Poverty Strategy and commitments contained in the Health Strategy, including:

- An integrated national programme for child health.
- Protocols and standards in relation to the care of children in hospitals.
- Expanded mental health services for children and adolescents including the implementation of the recommendations of the First Report of the Review Group on Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Services.

The Children's Rights Alliance is a coalition of 75 non-governmental organisations concerned with the rights and needs of children. The Alliance works to secure the full implementation in Ireland of the principles and provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

END

**For more information, contact: Sarah Benson, Children's Rights Alliance, Tel: 01 4054823 or 087 9273542, email [sarah@cra.iol.ie](mailto:sarah@cra.iol.ie)**