



The Future of Public Health in Canada

Canadian Public Health Association
Board of Directors Discussion Paper

As CPHA's President, I am pleased to present to CPHA's membership, "The Future of Public Health in Canada: CPHA Board of Directors Discussion Paper". Material from the Roundtable Discussions held by CPHA and the Provincial and Territorial Public Health Associations and Branches (PTBAs) last year was synthesized and reflected upon, resulting in the development of this paper which, importantly, situates Public Health as we move into the new century.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank CPHA and PTBA members across Canada who have participated in this process. Your comments, questions and reflections are most welcome.

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The [Canadian Public Health Association \(CPHA\)](#) is a national, independent, not-for-profit, voluntary association representing public health in Canada with links to the international public health community. CPHA's members believe in universal and equitable access to the basic conditions necessary to achieve health for all Canadians.

CPHA's mission is to constitute a special national resource in Canada that advocates for the improvement and maintenance of personal and community health according to the public health principles of disease prevention, health promotion and protection and healthy public policy.

The Canadian Public Health Association and its members are concerned about the future of Canada's health system and the health of individuals and communities.

CPHA Roundtables

This paper is based on a national consultation involving a series of regional roundtable discussions across Canada, which began the process of creating a vision for Public Health for the next decade. As part of the process, the Roundtables articulated the principles underlying Public Health, identified some of the strengths and the challenges faced, and outlined essential considerations that must be addressed if Canada is to maintain a strong Public Health component in a sustainable health care system for the future.

Some key reports that complement the roundtable discussions include the 1996 CPHA Board of Directors Issue Paper, *Focus on Health: Public Health in Health Services Restructuring* and the 2000 CPHA Board of Directors Issue Paper, *An Ounce of Prevention: Strengthening the Balance in Health Care Reform*.

Introduction or.... Cracks in the Foundation

As a people, we who live in Canada have never been healthier. Over the last century, Canadians everywhere have benefitted from fundamental social change, coupled with a sweeping range of nation-wide Public Health measures: from pasteurization and better nutrition to accident reduction and healthier lifestyles. ([See sidebar on page 3.](#))

Canadians have seen clear results in a great many areas, and overall, our life expectancy has climbed dramatically – from 50 years a half century ago to 79 years in 1996.

What makes people healthy?

The Public Health system has been at the forefront of change in the past, and has great potential to build a healthier future. Public Health approaches focus on the broad determinants of health, including people's living and working conditions. Canada's Public Health system has taken the lead in nation-wide programs that prevent disease and injury (from immunization to seat-belt use), in initiatives that protect health (from sanitation to pre-natal health), and in health promotion (from healthy heart lifestyle education to reductions in AIDS morbidity). This broad approach, which gets to the root of much of the illness and other health problems in Canada, underpins Public Health today.

Public Health: The foundation of a sustainable health system for all Canadians

Traditionally, governments have emphasized Public Health, recognizing its value to all communities and individuals. Strong Public Health programming not only improves health in its own right, but also is at the foundation of Canada's treatment system. Healthy populations need treatment less often, and respond more effectively when treatment is required.

Today, however, emphasis has shifted from promotion, prevention and protection to containing the costs of treatment. Canada's public health care insurance program is important in assuring that illness does not translate into bankruptcy, but as treatment costs continue to spiral upwards, investments in essential Public Health services have fallen.

If we neglect the Public Health services that are at the foundation of Canada's health care system, however, the system itself is threatened. Neglect can have devastating consequences. The *E.coli* contamination of the Walkerton water supply is just one case in point. While technologies and genomics capture the public imagination today, even the most optimistic technologies pale in effectiveness when compared to fundamental Public Health strategies that protect our health, prevent disease and injury, and promote health across all communities and socio-economic groups. A strong Public Health system can improve the health and well-being of Canadians for the least cost in the long run, both in human and economic terms. A strong Public Health system provides the foundation for a sustainable health system for all Canadians.

Responding to changing needs: Preparing to face the future

It is essential to the health care system as a whole that Canada continue to maintain its much-admired Public Health system, and build on its successes over the last century. The national Advisory Committee on Population Health is reviewing the capacity of Canada's Public Health services. Several provinces, as well, are assessing the ability of the Public Health system to meet the challenges.

Building Healthier Populations

The Public Health system monitors and strives to improve the health of communities through:

Prevention

- Offer early intervention and sound information to prevent the onset of disease, illness and injury;

Protection

- Identify, reduce and eliminate hazards and risks to the health of individuals including (community) disease surveillance and control;

Promotion

- Enable healthy choices and develop healthy and supportive environments.

Public Health workers are health advocates, promoting health in its broadest form.

The Future of Public Health in Canada: 10 Guiding Principles

How will Public Health evolve over the next decade? The Public Health system of the future will be founded on the basic principles that guide it today. Canada endorses the World Health Organization's goal of *Health for All*.

Public Health is much more than the presence and absence of disease. In the world-renowned Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, Canada's Public Health professionals advocated a broad view of health, successfully articulating a clearer vision of what health is. The Charter helped catalyze a shift in how Canadians think about health. Rather than focusing on institutional health (biomedical model), Canada is adopting a far broader definition of the determinants of health (biopsychosocial model), including: safe environments, adequate income, education and shelter, safe and nutritious food, and peace, equity and social justice.

Canada's Public Health system works for all Canadians, acting on factors in the environment that enable Canadians to be healthy and reducing inequities in the conditions that put some Canadians at a disadvantage for attaining and maintaining optimal health. These include the following 10 Guiding Principles:

Public good

Improvements in Public Health are core to the work of government, as part of its responsibility to improve Canada's quality of life and build a nation of healthy people living in healthy communities. Public Health is an integral element of a comprehensive and effective system for health. It builds conditions that promote health, and prevents that which is preventable, so that treatment is required less often and is applied in more favourable situations. What is needed is a commitment on the part of all Canadians to an overhaul of the structure of our health system so that it can meet the demands of the 21st century.

Public Health Achievements

Eradication or Control of Communicable Diseases

- ✓ Eradication of smallpox and polio
- ✓ Vaccine development and advances in immunization

Creating Healthier Environments

- ✓ Fluoride in water and toothpaste
- ✓ Iodine in salt
- ✓ Improved sanitation and cleaner water (water systems; sewage treatment)
- ✓ Safer and healthier food

Healthier Children and Families

- ✓ Healthier mothers and children
- ✓ Reductions in prenatal and perinatal mortality
- ✓ Enhancement of life expectancy in the first years of life
- ✓ 95% decrease in preventable diseases of children
- ✓ Increased breastfeeding

Healthier Lifestyles

- ✓ Public education programs to promote health
- ✓ Lifestyle changes promoting heart health
- ✓ Improved nutrition
- ✓ Reductions in tobacco use

Injury Prevention

- ✓ Vehicle safety, including seat belt legislation
- ✓ Helmet use
- ✓ Reductions in drunk driving

Health Protection

- ✓ Screening tests for many illnesses

Strong Community Partnerships to Address Health Issues

Legislation/Regulation to Protect Health/Control Disease

Reductions in Morbidity and Mortality

- ✓ HIV/AIDS
- ✓ Heart Health
- ✓ Injuries

Determinants of health

Public Health is concerned with the root causes affecting health and therefore, focuses on health promotion, disease and injury prevention and health protection.

Equity/ Diversity and social justice

Higher rates of illness, injury, morbidity and mortality are concentrated disproportionately among Canada's most vulnerable populations. Public Health seeks to redress these inequities and provide universal access to the determinants of health, by promoting equitable access to culturally relevant services and resources and by celebrating the diversity of our nation's peoples.

Partnership

Public Health builds alliances at the national, regional and community level to address health concerns, and involves consumers and communities in planning and program development.

Public participation

Program planning and resourcing is guided by community assessment, advocacy, health protection and health promotion, and is founded on a base of public input and accountability. Public health "thinks globally, but acts locally."

Interdisciplinary approaches

Individual and community needs are addressed by broad partnerships that integrate health and other sectors.

Science-based

Public Health services and approaches are based on the science and research of many disciplines. Strong science is fundamental to effective surveillance and evaluation, and enriches our understanding of relationships and causation.

Efficient/Cost-effective

Public Health insists upon the ongoing evaluation of programs, including cost-effectiveness studies.

Continual improvement

Public Health adopts new technologies, approaches and best practices to strengthen our knowledge, our service delivery and our outreach to communities and individuals.

Sustainability

A sustainable Public Health system is responsive to changing community needs and resources.

Our Strengths

Public Health is well equipped to lead the way to the best possible health care programs and services for Canadians, regardless of where or how they live.

Broad-based interaction

Because Public Health focuses on the broad determinants of health, it is situated at the point where individuals and families interact with service providers and governments. It is capable of creating alliances and partnerships across the private and voluntary sectors, across professions, and among communities, and of harnessing broad support for priority issues and community development.

This multi-sectoral outreach is particularly important as the health care system, including roles, responsibilities and program funding, is restructured. It is increasingly necessary to integrate services and funding, and even more closely involve communities in planning and delivery.

In tune with consumers and communities

This increasing need for broad involvement comes at a time when Canadians, as a population, are adopting a broader definition of health, and acknowledging the wide range of factors that contribute to the health of the population.

Strong tools

Today, technological developments are extending the reach of Public Health into distant and remote communities, making it possible to provide better information and better access to health services and interventions.

Research into the broader determinants of health has contributed important information and data on best practices and will continue to support and strengthen evidence-based decision-making. Interventions and strategies associated with early child development have been especially instrumental in demonstrating the longer term benefits of Public Health interventions.

Solid track record

The Public Health sector can build on the success of a great many effective community and regional initiatives across the country. These initiatives include programs for dental health, sexual and reproductive health, diabetic health and women's health as well as innovative primary care models and programs for the elderly, promotion of immunization and communicable disease control, and broad programs for literacy and environmental health.

Public Health practitioners can coordinate and support communities across the country, effectively using stories to profile successful community initiatives and share them among jurisdictions. They can, for example, share health promotion campaigns that increase the uptake of influenza immunization.

The impact of these Public Health successes is being enhanced by strengthened evaluation of programs (including Public Health interventions), and improved reporting of outcomes to inform the public.

Challenges: Increasing Complexity and Erosion of Funding

Canada's Public Health system is currently being challenged on a great many fronts, its effectiveness threatened. The future health of Canadians – and the means by which that health is supported – will be influenced by many sectors and will require the collaboration of professionals across many disciplines.

Increasing complexity

As our understanding of the determinants of health becomes more complex, so too does the identification of problems and appropriate solutions. With increasing complexity come increasing demands and responsibilities. In a society that is increasingly technology-driven and globally-oriented, Public Health must take action against illiteracy and reduce inequities in the social conditions that prevent Canadians from attaining optimal health.

Working across increasingly complex jurisdictions and across a broad array of sectors makes it difficult to articulate clear roles and responsibilities, and even to clarify the language we use and the technologies we require.

There is an increased need for ongoing training within the Public Health field, to allow practitioners to adapt their skills and strategies to incorporate the advocacy and community mobilization associated with population health approaches. Public Health needs to recruit and train diverse professionals skilled not only in developing and delivering programs based on community needs, but also in measuring the effectiveness of professional interventions.

Erosion of funding

Despite growing public understanding of the broad determinants of health, Canada's system is still primarily focused on acute care. Since public health programs typically involve long-term investments (and measurement) to gauge results, even substantial successes can be invisible to politicians and the public as a whole. Reporting is especially challenging in a political environment that seeks short-term returns.

The benefits of investing in Public Health – including lower care costs, improved well-being and greater productivity – are often overshadowed or poorly understood. Policy-makers often do not understand the root causes of poor health and are preoccupied with issues such as privatization and perceived inadequacies in the health care/treatment system, including the anticipated future demands of Canada's aging population.

This counter-productive competition for funding among various arms of Canada's health system is likely to continue as other areas vie for scarce public funds: chronic illness, re-emergent communicable diseases, and environmental health issues and toxins. The consequent erosion of funding and support for Public Health poses a major challenge since it diminishes the capacity of Public Health to respond to existing demands and the emerging challenges of the 21st century.

What We Need to Achieve

Over the next 15 years, Public Health leaders will need to capitalize on strengths inherent in the Public Health approach, and continue to address the root causes of poor health. Health care cannot be compartmentalized into sectors. It is increasingly necessary to harness a wide spectrum of Canadians to promote an inclusive definition of what health is, what a strong health system is, and how Canadians can best achieve them.

What we need to tackle the job at hand:

Balanced Funding

- Increase Public Health funding by influencing and changing the health budgeting process;
- Develop new funding models that focus on health determinants and the results Canadians want to achieve;
- Address private and public funding and delivery issues;
- Invest in community capacity-building, helping communities develop primary health care services and other tools and knowledge that families need to take responsibility for their own health.

Reliable Information

- To make sure that Public Health decisions are based on strong evidence;
- Develop health goals;
- Enhance support and funding for research and surveillance;
- Develop and support best practices;
- Improve information on performance and results;
- Develop report cards and other accountability measures, such as a Public Health watchdog/champion/ombudsperson.

Facing the Challenges

The issues facing Public Health practitioners are many, and include both the socio-economic environment and the physical environment; individual biology and genetic endowment; personal health practices and child development issues; and even health services themselves.

New challenges to Public Health in Canada emerge almost on a daily basis, and according to the *Second Report on the Health of Canadians*, despite the advances made by Public Health in recent decades, many challenges to the health of Canadians have yet to receive an adequate response. The challenges include (but are not restricted to) the following:

- Aboriginal health
- Bicycle injury prevention (helmet legislation)
- Motor vehicle injury prevention (car seats, seat belts)
- Suicide
- Violence and its impacts on families
- Sexuality and reemerging sexually transmitted diseases (syphilis)
- Tobacco use
- Addictions
- Lifestyle (nutrition, activity, tobacco use)
- Cancer prevention
- Breastfeeding (regional imbalances)
- Communicable diseases (TB, HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, measles)
- Antibiotic-resistant infections
- Children's health (impact of socio-economic status)
- Population aging
- Homelessness
- Evaluation of Public Health outcomes
- Equity (equal access/inclusion)
- Health system reform
- Health system sustainability
- Inadequate Public Health funding
- Globalization and the impacts it is having locally
- New technologies (e.g., xenotechnology; genetic susceptibility testing; internet) and their impacts on communities
- Social marketing of Public Health
- Health impacts of environmental deterioration
- Capacity of Public Health to meet the needs of diverse communities.

Better Communication

- Using comprehensive and reliable information, Public Health communicators need to:
- Make better use of strategies such as social marketing to focus attention on Public Health issues, using the media to promote awareness (seat belt use, impaired driving) and to strengthen people's abilities to positively influence their own health;
- Build on past successes.

Social Equity

- Develop a greater commitment to social equity to reduce socio-economic inequalities affecting health.

Stronger Recruitment

- Develop a critical mass of Public Health expertise to promote best practices throughout the country.

Intersectoral Collaboration

- Build community involvement and participation;
- Demonstrate the benefits of regional collaboration in developing and delivering health services;
- Make effective use of legislation and public policy to reinforce Public Health initiatives (such as tobacco reduction);
- Extend alliances: use evidence and success stories to create networks around core health issues, particularly among those outside the health sector;
- Capitalize on a strong base of public confidence in the profession to mobilize resources around key issues (see sidebar).

Increase Visibility and Advocacy

- To promote enlightened Public Health policies and effective Public Health funding, it is essential that Public Health partners extend their influence on decision-makers:
- Develop strong, knowledgeable Public Health leadership across all related sectors;
- Continue to develop evidence that demonstrates that Public Health is cost-effective, its positive impact long-term;
- Advocate balanced and more appropriate investments in Public Health programs;
- Create a clear and consistent voice for Public Health at all levels.

Conclusion

The roundtables identified some of the issues central to the future of the Public Health system in Canada. It is clear that if Canada is to maintain its much admired quality of life, major changes must occur. Responding to the challenges effectively is central to future improvements in the health of Canadians and to the mission of Public Health in the decade ahead.

The good news is that whatever the resources available, investments in Public Health invariably result in large health gains. A strong Public Health system has excellent potential to build on its past successes, and reduce the burden of illness in the near and distant future. ■