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**Canadian Public Health Association  
Submission to the  
Senate Subcommittee on Population Health**

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# Canadian Public Health Association Submission to the Senate Subcommittee on Population Health

## Introduction

The Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) is pleased to present this written submission to the Senate Subcommittee on Population Health for consideration in its final report and recommendations to be tabled in December 2008.

CPHA has read the Senate Subcommittee's four reports with great interest. We are delighted and impressed with the level of analysis conducted and the recognition of the challenges that exist. Many of the key messages in the Subcommittee's reports, particularly the *Population Health Policy: Issues and Options Report*, emphasize what public health has always been about, its *raison d'être*. By this we mean that public health encompasses the entire spectrum of:

- the determinants of health and the factors that affect them;
- policies and strategies that address population health; and,
- standards and targets that meet the social, economic and environmental goals for the determinants of health.

Therefore, in formulating our response, we have used a public health approach in order to address key issues and options and how CPHA could assist in their translation to action.

## About CPHA

CPHA is a national, not-for-profit, non-governmental, professional association founded in 1910 and incorporated in 1912. CPHA's membership is composed of individuals representing more than 25 health-related and non-health-related disciplines. CPHA stresses its partnership role by working with federal and provincial/territorial governments, national institutions and agencies, non-governmental organizations and professional associations, and the private for-profit sector to generate and promote the application of the evidence that enhances public health policy, programming and practice. As Canada's authoritative non-governmental voice for public health, CPHA advocates for equal access for all to the conditions that safeguard and improve personal and community health according to the public health principles of disease prevention, health promotion and protection and healthy public policy.

### **Examining the Issues from a Public Health Approach**

CPHA wholeheartedly endorses the Subcommittee's analysis of the determinants of health. The public health focus on populations and communities complements and strengthens the health system and also supports a more comprehensive approach to address the conditions that affect human health. The issues and options presented by the Committee are all worthy of consideration and we anticipate that they will generate considerable interest among respondents.

While the Committee's astute analysis of the determinants of health is welcomed, one area that CPHA feels is also important, and could be better included in the interpretation of the determinants of health issues described, is the issue of **health security**. The concept of health security has been defined as the comprehensive basket of health and social services and income support mechanisms that protect against or alleviate the consequences of illness, trauma or injury. What is needed is a broader, more intensive approach to health security. It entails public responsibility to ensure that all citizens have access to the conditions that exert a positive influence on their health and the health of their community in a consistent, reliable, and sensitive manner. The system must be integrated and coordinated to reduce unnecessary stress on the individual and community and to ensure that there are no unnecessary duplicate efforts and costs to society.<sup>1</sup>

There is a strong economic case linking social determinants of health, (e.g. poverty, social inclusion, unequal income distribution, health literacy) with health inequalities. We know the burden of cost for poor health outcomes on individuals, on communities and to society. Canada must be equally prepared for future threats to human well-being and security by investing now and over the long term. Investment in responsive and effective public health is an investment in the sustainability of the population's health. Building healthy environments, a link between the determinants of health and health security, is critical and has a greater impact than addressing either alone.

A health security strategy is needed to not only raise public support and awareness, but to build the knowledge, understanding and skills both within and outside government for policy-makers, planners and practitioners. Public health is well positioned to play a leadership and facilitation role to help with knowledge translation and exchange across diverse professional groups and to respond to the social, economic and environmental factors that cause health inequalities.

### **Issue for Consideration: Enhancing Public Health Capacity**

One of the few gaps in the *Issues and Options Report* is in the area of enhancing public health capacity. While the federal government has taken steps over the past few years to increase funding to the health sector, the gaps identified in the Naylor Report<sup>2</sup> with respect to the public health system have not been fully addressed. Canada still remains vulnerable to the risks posed by epidemics, pandemics and other public health threats. Attention needs to be paid to investment in Canada's public health system capacity. As long as the public health system remains under-resourced, it will not be able to address the broad spectrum of determinants of health. What is needed is enhanced investment in public health research to generate the kind of evidence to improve the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of policies and programs.

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<sup>1</sup> Saltman, Richard B. [2008] *Adopting household health security as a health reform strategy*. *Social Theory & Health*, 2008(6): p.54-59.

<sup>2</sup> Health Canada. [2003] *Learning from SARS: Renewal of Public Health in Canada*. Government of Canada: Ottawa ON

CPHA has identified three available options to address the issues of enhancing public health capacity and encourages of all three options. While we believe that all three options are essential, we recognize that the Committee will have to choose, among different strategies, how best to recommend progress be made in addressing the determinants of health and improving the health of Canadians.

***Option: Bolstering Core Public Health Functions, Programs and Services***

Disease prevention and health promotion are critical for maintaining and improving the health of Canadians. Interventions in primary prevention and health promotion are cost-effective and cost-saving. With Canada's changing demographics, strong, well-funded prevention and promotion strategies will be increasingly critical.

For example, the recent report from the Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada emphasizes that chronic diseases are the major cause of death and responsible for the highest proportion of burden of disease in this country. Two-thirds of all deaths in Canada are due to certain cancers, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and chronic lung disorders. At the same time, it is estimated that 80% of premature heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes, and 40% of cancers could be prevented through strong public health responses that include the promotion of healthy diet, regular physical activity, and harm reduction related to health-affecting substance use (which includes illicit drugs use as well as tobacco and alcohol consumption).<sup>3</sup>

Such strategies can enhance health security by reducing poverty and narrowing income-related inequalities. However, a "one-size-fits-all" approach will not work; interventions need to be specific to the population and address local issues and priorities, recognizing that Canada is one of the countries where Indigenous populations require particular attention. As has been noted elsewhere, we must not increase inequalities albeit through well-intentioned efforts. If the aim is to improve the health of all Canadians, a shift in thinking and action is required by which the public health community examines and responds to the role played by poverty and the structural factors that are the cause of health disparities. Changing individual lifestyle risk behaviours is not sufficient. Building community competence for health must become the focus of our collective efforts.

***Option: Providing Continued and Enhanced Public Health Leadership***

Federal, provincial/territorial and municipal/regional governments must provide leadership to enhance public health's capacity to address the broad determinants of health. As has been noted by other public health researchers, substantial political leadership and government investment is necessary to ensure broad-based interventions that will be successful in shifting risk factor prevalence.

Public health leadership must be based on a spectrum of government initiatives and intersectoral collaboration to ensure that government policies and legislations reflect a population health approach. Transforming thinking towards a population health approach for policy, programming and practice requires imagination, leadership, commitment, ongoing monitoring of impacts and sustained action.

Public health leaders across the country have been pushing the research agenda, opening dialogue and building partnerships with those working in urban planning, housing, finance, social services, education, agriculture and many other sectors to

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<sup>3</sup> Chronic Disease Alliance of Canada. [2007] *Improving the Health of Canadians: Health Promotion Priorities for Canada*. CDPAC: Ottawa, ON.

change the way we approach population health. Creating these effective alliances with other sectors is instrumental in the development of public policies that produce and maintain health. Whether at the federal, provincial/territorial or regional level, public health plays a key facilitating role.

Non-governmental organizations play a critical role in conducting strategic research, advocating for change and action, and facilitating citizen involvement. Multi-level public health approaches not only enhance health, they build public support. Leadership, commitment and investment are needed to put words into action. Public health is well poised to leverage what we already know to galvanize action.

***Option: Expanding, Improving and Retaining Public Health Human Resources***

Human resources are integral to a population health approach, but the workforce that protects and promotes the health of Canadians is stretched to the limit. A comprehensive strategy to enhance pan-Canadian public health human resources development, training, deployment, support and retention is essential. This strategy needs to consider how to work effectively in settings within and outside the health care system, including schools, the workplace and the community.

A well-trained and competent workforce is needed to respond in a timely and effective manner to the population's health. This includes a whole range of public health professionals and especially those on the front lines who are working to address health inequalities.

It is critical to establish a robust human resources strategy that develops an inter-professional workforce with the knowledge, skills and resources to enhance the capacity of all jurisdictions to meet the needs of the health system at all levels – for both good public health and good health care.

**Moving Forward: CPHA's Role and Commitment**

CPHA is prepared to play a key role in supporting the recommendations of the Senate Subcommittee's report to move forward an effective population health approach in Canada. CPHA is ready to work in partnership with organizations and other entities that share our goals for improved health outcomes in Canada.

While the pan-Canadian health landscape is becoming increasingly complex, public health can act as an advocate and the convenor for all parties involved in health and other sectors to come together and collaborate to improve the health of our communities.

In October 2007, a national steering committee was established to develop the scientific program for the CPHA 2008 Annual Conference. The development of the Conference's program included a commitment by CPHA to deliver a Call to Action, addressing health inequalities in Canada. This Call was informed by the discussions among the public health community at the conference in Halifax in June 2008.

From every aspect of the conference, there was one very clear message: we have the knowledge, we have created many of the conceptual frameworks here in Canada for understanding that knowledge, we know what needs to be done, and now we need to get on with it.

The vision, the urgency and the call for immediate action by the Canadian public health community voiced at the CPHA 2008 Annual Conference created momentum for change. We

are living in a country where structural injustices that affect the health and well-being of many Canadians have been allowed to take root. This is not our vision of Canada. It is time to take leadership and move forward with translating our vision into practical, sustainable results.

To this end, and in support of the work of the Senate Subcommittee on Population Health, CPHA will, over the next twelve months:

- ◆ serve as a clearinghouse for coordination and communicating best practices;
- ◆ communicate the meaningfulness of reports such as the report of the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, and the Senate Subcommittee on Population Health;
- ◆ convene a forum for practitioners, partners, and stakeholders to identify evidence-based best practices and to develop strategies for communicating the practices to program planners, policy developers and funders;
- ◆ provide a venue for national/provincial/territorial public health associations, medical officers of health, our members, and key partners to coordinate messages and actions;
- ◆ devise new, more effective ways of building public awareness, engagement and mobilization;
- ◆ use the sense of urgency to expand the circle of concern over health inequalities;
- ◆ help build a significant social movement; and
- ◆ position CPHA's *2009 Annual Conference* (Winnipeg: June 7–10, 2009) as a forum for sharing progress in addressing health inequalities.

### **Conclusion**

Canadians will benefit a better approach to address the numerous health inequalities in this country. The Canadian Public Health Association wants to improve health outcomes for all and looks forward to working with the Senate Sub-Committee on Population Health to achieve our shared goal.