

Creating Conditions for Health

Submitted to the
Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada



by the
Canadian Public Health Association

October 2001

Canadian Public Health Association

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Introduction

Who We Are

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

The CPHA community is multidisciplinary and multisectoral in nature including many different professions, among them administrators, policy makers, academics, community health nurses, medical officers, health and environmental health workers, public health inspectors and nutritionists. Through these diverse professionals, CPHA addresses a broad range of health and social issues, and has links to almost every community in Canada and to the international public health community.

The Work We Do

Throughout the 20th century, Public Health has been recognized as the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health and efficiency through organized community effort.

In Canada, the Public Health system has taken the lead in nation-wide programs that **prevent** disease and injury (from immunization to seatbelt use), **protect** health (from sanitation to prenatal health) and **promote** healthy choices (from healthy heart lifestyle education to reductions in AIDS risk factors and morbidity). Public Health approaches focus on the broad determinants of health, including people's living and working conditions. This broad approach, which seeks to address the root causes of much of the illness and other health problems in Canada, underpins Public Health today.

The Public Health Perspective: Focus on the Fundamentals

Traditionally, governments have recognized the value of Public Health programs to all communities and individuals, nation-wide. Strong Public Health programming not only improves health in its own right, but is also at the foundation of Canada's treatment system. Healthy populations need treatment less often, and respond more effectively when treatment is required. A strong Public Health system **can improve the health and well-being of Canadians for the least long-term cost**, both in human and economic terms.

Today, however, as treatment costs continue to spiral, 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, the system itself is threatened. The *E.coli* contamination of the Walkerton water supply is just one case in point.

Public Health and Canada's Health System as a Whole

CPHA believes that Canada's Public Health system is uniquely positioned to continue its contribution to Canadian health, by renewing and reorienting the health sector. Not only does it provide critical disease and injury prevention, health protection and health promotion strategies that mitigate the need for care in the first place; it also has a strong history of creating effective alliances with other sectors instrumental in the development of public policies that produce and maintain health.

Canada's Public Health system makes a substantial contribution to the quality of Canadian life. Public Health workers are health advocates, promoting health in its broadest form, and working closely with individuals in their homes, their schools, their workplaces and their communities. Public Health workers are important points of contact for Canadians who want to participate in the creation of a better Canadian health system for the 21st century.

Creating Conditions for Health

Recommendations to the Commission

The Areas of Inquiry: Troubling Gaps

While CPHA recognizes that the themes outlined by the Romanow Commission are very broad, **there is no mention at all of health promotion and disease prevention or focus on population health.** These gaps are very troubling.

Health promotion and disease prevention are essential aspects of Canada's Public Health system, which has been at the forefront of change in the past, and has great potential to build a healthier future. In fact, it is only with a strong Public Health system that Canada can continue to **create conditions for good health**, and achieve the World Health Organization's goal of "health for all".

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.

Our Changing Environment

Two issues should perhaps be given special mention, since both reflect critical changes in the fabric of our society, and promise to be priorities for Canada's health system.

1. The tragic events of September 11 alerted Canadians to the necessity of a strong Public Health infrastructure capable of delivering emergency Public Health services across the whole population. The Public Health system, with its outreach into communities and workplaces, is ideally suited to deliver emergency aid, but the recent crisis amply demonstrated the deficiencies in our system, and our inability to respond effectively and quickly. Our Public Health infrastructure will require immediate and significant upgrading if we are to enhance our ability to protect the public health.
2. Canadians are well aware that the country's demographics are changing, and that increases in aging-related and chronic diseases will place further demands on Canada's health system as a whole. The health system must, of course, prepare to cope with the increased demand for treatment of illnesses and conditions that cannot be avoided. But perhaps even more importantly, Canada needs to invest in strategies to prevent that which is preventable.

Prevention and health promotion are essential aspects of Public Health and with Canada's changing demographics, strong, well-funded prevention strategies will be increasingly critical to the health system as a whole.

Canadian Values: A Canadian Definition of What Health Means

The world-renowned Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (1986) successfully articulated a new, clearer vision of what health is. In the past, Canada's health system followed a biomedical model, focusing primarily on health care in hospitals, clinics and other institutions. Today, Canada is adopting a far broader definition of the **determinants of health**, including: safe environments, adequate income, education, shelter, safe and nutritious food, and peace, equity and social justice. This biopsychosocial model recognizes the complex nature of health.

The Ottawa Charter helped catalyze a shift in how Canadians think about health. In Canada, good health is much more than the presence or absence of disease. Our life expectancy has climbed dramatically – from 59 years in the 1920s to 78.8 years in 1998 – largely because of the control and prevention of infectious diseases by Public Health programs (Crompton, Canadian Social Trends, [Statistics Canada](#)). Canadians have benefitted from a wide variety of non-medical interventions, from clean water to better housing. These fundamental social changes have been coupled with a sweeping range of nation-wide Public Health measures, from pasteurization and better nutrition to accident reduction and healthier lifestyles.

At all ages, Canadians are healthier now than they were 20 years ago. Canadians are committed to building on those gains, and to do so means focusing on the **root causes** affecting health. Canada's Public Health system monitors and strives to improve the overall health of communities by focusing on health promotion, disease and injury prevention and health protection.

*“So, how do we make the national principle of
comprehensiveness more meaningful...?”*

... Commissioner Roy Romanow to the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions

Adopt a vision that emphasizes fairness, equity and “Health for All”

Improvements in Public Health are core to the work of government. Ongoing work is essential if we are to continue to improve Canada's quality of life, and build a nation of healthy people living in healthy communities.

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.

Today, higher rates of illness, injury, morbidity and mortality are concentrated disproportionately among Canada's most vulnerable populations. The Public Health system seeks to address barriers in access to key health determinants, and thereby promote equitable access to culturally relevant services for vulnerable populations. Only by designing programs that respect the cultures of the nation's people and communities and by celebrating Canada's diversity, can health professionals help improve the health of vulnerable populations and reduce the demands on the health system as a whole.

Achieving “Health for All” means providing universal access to those determinants of health we can modify. Enhancing the health of vulnerable populations is one of the key health challenges we face in Canada today.

- **Canada requires a broad vision for health care in the 21st century** that identifies an integrated continuum of services and is focused on population health and the full range of factors affecting it. A broad vision will address persistent inequalities in health status, and the needs of Canada’s most vulnerable populations.

Such a vision must focus on the broader determinants of health if it is to get to the root of the real health issues in Canadian society.

Sustainability: Thinking Long-Term

In Canada today, much of our energy is focused on containing the high costs of treatment. The potential of new technologies and genomics captures the public imagination, but as inspiring as the technological advances are, even the most optimistic technologies pale in effectiveness when compared to fundamental Public Health strategies.

Injury prevention is but one example. Canadians spend \$8.7 billion annually to treat about 2 million injuries that for the most part could have been predicted and prevented. Protective and preventive measures such as seatbelts, bicycle helmets, speed controls and highway redesign have helped reduce the overall rates of injury deaths, but it is estimated that some 22,000 further injuries and permanent disabilities could be prevented. Prevention strategies save lives and result in about \$500 million in net savings in health care costs annually (SMARTRISK Foundation, *The Economic Burden of Unintentional Injury in Canada*, 1998).

Strategies that protect our health, prevent disease and injury, and promote health across all communities and socio-economic groups, have a strong impact on **reducing demand** for the tertiary care system. Public Health services build conditions that promote health and prevent that which is preventable, so that treatment is required less often and is applied in more favourable situations.

The message is clear: to reduce the demand for tertiary care, Canada’s system requires a fundamental shift. Canada needs to focus on health promotion and disease prevention in order to make the greatest gains in population health. To do so, it needs to invest in strong systems for Public Health and primary health care.

A strong Public Health system is a fundamental component of a sustainable health system for all Canadians. Its importance cannot be overestimated. A truly sustainable health system is a **balanced system**, which develops and invests in a full range of health services, from Public Health and community care through hospitals and long-term care facilities.

In an integrated and balanced health system, **Public Health should be endorsed as a critical component and Public Health policies, programs and services should be planned, funded and delivered accordingly**. The principles of the Canada Health Act should be extended to include health promotion and disease prevention.

Allocate resources in a more balanced manner

Despite growing public understanding of the broad determinants of health, Canada's system is still primarily focused on acute care. Policy-makers are often preoccupied with issues such as perceived inadequacies in the health care/treatment system, including the anticipated future demands of Canada's aging population. Indeed, these services are critical to the well-being of Canadians everywhere, whether they or their family members require cataract surgery or life-saving cancer treatment.

Public Health services, however, are equally essential. Public Health successes have been many, from the control of communicable diseases to reductions in drunk driving and huge decreases in the preventable diseases of children. Major improvements in prenatal care alone have saved the health care system millions of dollars by decreasing the number of low birthweight babies. The saving over the course of each baby's life: \$600,000 in hospital and medical costs.)

But those successes – even those that are substantial – are often invisible to politicians and the public as a whole, since Public Health programs typically involve investments and measurement over the long term to gauge results. 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.

Nonetheless, competition for funding among various arms of Canada's health system is counter-productive.

- **Canada needs to develop an appropriate growth factor (or a cost escalator) to ensure ongoing, adequate financing and stability for the full health care system.** It must, simultaneously, develop strategies to allocate more appropriate levels of public resources for Public Health: disease and injury prevention, health protection and promotion.

Engage people in their own health

Sustainability, however, depends on far more than funding issues. A sustainable Public Health system is responsive to changing community needs and resources. Canadians are increasingly insistent on genuine public participation in setting the values and principles underlying the system.

This insistence on public participation has become abundantly clear in restructuring efforts that have been underway in the provinces and territories since the 1980s. Several common themes have emerged. As well as the broad emphasis on population health, supported by balanced funding, jurisdictions are calling for renewed effort to bring the planning and delivery of health services closer to residents.

Canadians come into contact with the Public Health system daily, through the disinfected fluoridated water we drink to the immunization programs and safe food we depend on. Public Health measures and programs are a fundamental part of everyday life.

And when Canadians need health care, the first step in the continuum is primary health care. It provides the initial contact for the individual, the family and the community with the health treatment system, bringing health care as close as possible to where people live, work and play.

- **Canada must strengthen primary health care as the point of initial contact of individuals, families and communities with the health treatment system.**

Managing Change

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.

The demands are many and varied. For example, in a society that is technology-driven and globally-oriented, Public Health must take action against illiteracy. This is part of the broader commitment of Public Health to reduce the inequities in social conditions that prevent Canadians from attaining optimal health.

No jurisdiction can handle such challenges alone. Yet, working across a wide range of jurisdictions and 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. On the bright side, there are many examples in many communities of citizens, agencies and sectors coming together to create conditions for health. These successes need to be shared.

“Health care has often been described as the most complex organizational structure in existence. Change is very difficult.”

... Commissioner Roy Romanow to the Canadian Medical Association

Strengthen recruitment

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. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion stresses the need for health professionals to utilize a wide variety of strategies that focus on individuals, families and communities. To do this highly complex job, Public Health organizations need 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 programming and professional interventions.

- **Canada needs to build a critical mass of Public Health expertise** to promote best practices throughout the country. This includes making investments in knowledge and skills development; human resource development and utilization strategies; alliance-building and inter-sectoral collaboration; performance and outcome indicators; and community-based governance systems.

Strengthen science-based approaches/ accountability

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.

In the Public Health field, however, sound decision-making depends not only on enhanced research and surveillance, but also on setting clear health goals that matter to Canadians, and designing accountability measures such as Report Cards and public watchdogs or champions, that verify whether or not the programs are working as intended. We need to better determine what works best for whom, when, and with what risks and benefits.

- Across the broader health services continuum, **health professionals need to develop strategies to strengthen the transparency and accountability of government health care funding** including measures to strengthen information-sharing and public reporting on outcomes.

Co-operative Relations: The Need for a Seamless Continuum of Services

Canadians expect a **seamless continuum of health services**, regardless of who is in charge of service delivery. Health care should ideally begin where we live and work, and extend from re-invigorated Public Health services through more efficient and effective hospitals and long-term care facilities to more responsive community-based services.

A truly seamless system will look and operate very differently from the one we have today, and it will require federal participation in non-insured services including Public Health, primary health care and community and home care – all essential components of a comprehensive health system.

The federal government plays a major financial role, but its participation is also key to ensuring that Canada's health system is equitable, its resources shared wisely across jurisdictions. Canadians want a health system where all people – whether they live in Prince Edward Island or Nunavut or Ontario – have the same access to Public Health care services, and where health professionals share expertise and information across jurisdictions, through state-of-the-art systems such as interprovincial surveillance reporting.

“But there is far more to solving the health care puzzle than intergovernmental relations...”

... Commissioner Roy Romanow to the CMA

Harness support by investing in communities

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 is restructured. It is increasingly necessary to integrate services and funding, and even more closely involve communities in planning and delivery.

- **Canada needs to invest in community capacity-building**, helping communities develop primary health care services and other tools and knowledge that families and individuals need to take responsibility for their own health.

Boost public confidence by building on Public Health successes

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 health care models and programs for the elderly, promotion of immunization, communicable disease control and broad programs for literacy and environmental health.

Public Health practitioners can coordinate and support communities across the country, effectively using success 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 enhanced by strengthened evaluation of programs and improved reporting of outcomes to inform the public.

- **Canada needs to capitalize on a strong base of public confidence in the Public Health profession** to mobilize resources around key issues.

To build alliances and create networks around core health issues, communication with the public is key. Canadians want comprehensive and reliable information. Health professionals can, as well, make better use of strategies such as social marketing to focus attention on Public Health issues, using the media to promote awareness (e.g., seatbelt use, impaired driving) and to strengthen people's abilities to positively influence their own health. Momentum for the future can be built on past successes.

Conclusion

Health care cannot be compartmentalized into sectors. A healthy nation requires far more than a strong treatment system. It is increasingly necessary that we, as health professionals, 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. Those who work in Canada's Public Health system are well placed to lead Canadians in the dialogue, and help craft an exemplary health system.

The good news is that whatever the resources available, investments in Public Health 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.