

## WHAT IS PUBLIC HEALTH? CANADIAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

*Public Health keeps Canadians healthy and safe at work, in school, in the community, at home and at play.*

**Public health** focuses on the social, environmental and economic factors affecting health as well as on the communities and settings where people gather and live. Because the public health system works to prevent problems before they come up, it is often invisible, and receives little attention from governments until something goes wrong.

There are five key functions of public health:

- **health promotion** (actions to affect overall health and wellbeing);
- **prevention** (of specific diseases, injuries and social problems),
- **protection** (preventive and emergency services);
- **surveillance** (keeping track of patterns of disease to enable timely action);
- **population health assessment** (measuring, monitoring and reporting on the status of the health of your community).

Public health and publicly **funded** health care is sometimes confused but there is a difference. Public health practitioners and organizations work with other systems such as housing, schools and recreation services, and with individuals to promote and protect health, and prevent disease and injury

**Public health** works over long periods of time, while health care is usually more immediate. **Health care** generally focuses on acute illness, diseases and conditions. Health care is concerned primarily with the cure or care of individuals through hospitals, clinics, physicians and other professionals. Both systems deal with infectious and non-infectious diseases and injuries. Both are necessary and must work together to keep people healthy.

### WHAT DOES PUBLIC HEALTH MEAN TO ME?

- Safe, healthy places to live, learn, work and play.
- Educating people about healthy choices to stay well and free from injury.
- Providing information about diseases and how to prevent them.
- Re-orienting health services to include more prevention.

Encouraging health and preventing illness enables people to live healthier, longer lives and can reduce health care costs for individuals, families, employers and governments over the longer term.

Many of today's health issues affect entire populations (e.g. global warming). National boundaries cannot block infectious diseases from other countries (e.g. SARS). Issues such as obesity cannot be solved through health care or public health systems acting alone.

### WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

The reality is that our public health system is stretched to capacity. Recent events such as the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, the contamination of the water supply, and the growing burden of chronic disease have caused Canadians to lose confidence in the integrity of the public health system.

### WHAT ARE THE FACTS?

Responsibility for public health is spread across federal, provincial/territorial and municipal governments and several ministries, resulting in a patchwork of programs, services and resources across the country. There is no clear leadership, no clear lines of authority, few mechanisms for sustained cooperation and no unifying legislation for public health across the country. Spending on public health amounts to only 1.8% of total health expenditures in Canada. Far more attention goes to fixing health problems after they occur than to preventing them. Canada is facing a shortage of public health professionals in all disciplines and all jurisdictions.

Almost one-half of premature deaths can be prevented through health prevention and promotion

Until SARS hit Canada in 2003, health care had received almost all of the attention of the public, government and the media. Everyone now recognizes the vital linkages between health care and public health. A weakened public health system cannot deal with emergencies such as SARS, or prevent other diseases. Canada's public health strategy must support and interact with our international development commitments to health, social development, and trade because disease and its causes do not respect borders.

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