

Citizens' Dialogue on Public Health Goals in Canada — Result Highlights

Conducted by
EKOS Research Associates in association with Canadian Policy Research Networks

Background

The purpose of the Citizens' Dialogues, commissioned by the Public Health Agency of Canada, was to use a deliberative process to engage ordinary Canadians in a discussion on what they consider to be most important with respect to determining public health goals for Canada. Participants were randomly selected, and were not affiliated with any organized group. Citizens' Dialogues can provide guidance on what Canadians most value when it comes to public health, as well as an understanding of how they talk about public health.

The findings from these dialogues will complement the findings from the other components of the broad national consultation process that is underway. The common public health goals will provide a reference framework against which governments can develop specific short, medium and long-term goals and targets, and coordinate their respective public health activities. This information can also help guide responsible officials to use language and concepts that resonate with the public.

Five dialogue sessions were held across the country – in Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto, Quebec City (French) and Halifax – in August 2005. Just over 100 citizens participated in this consultation. Each session was attended by roughly 20 participants, randomly recruited to be representative of the region, according to gender, age, income and education level. While most participants came from within commuting distance from their respective centre, some were drawn from other parts of the province, adjacent provinces and the northern territories.

Each session took place over the course of a Friday evening and a Saturday. The Friday session provided information to participants on public health and an op-

portunity to have questions answered, and the Saturday session was used for dialogue. To each of the participants of these sessions, who gave up a summer weekend to attend, we would like to thank you for your dedication and commitment to public health and shaping public policy.

It should be noted that throughout the discussions participants talked about values, goals and means in a fairly fluid and unstructured manner. While we have imposed some order on the results, by presenting the discussions according to underlying values, and then goals (with means often addressed in with the description of goals), we have tried not to alter the substantive meaning or intention of participants' comments. It should also be noted that we have presented the values and the goals in order of importance as they were expressed across the five dialogue sessions.

Underlying Values

Importance of Population Health

It was clear from participants across the country that there is a deep appreciation for the importance of good health for individuals, families and communities. Participants easily made links between health and a number of other things, including quality of life, economic prospects and health of the economy, and a well-rounded society. They also expressed their recognition of the linkage between good health and the benefits for the health care system on many occasions. Finally, over the course of the dialogue, participants began to come to grips with the array and interconnectedness of various social and physical determinants of health. In developing public health goals, the discussions touched on numerous determinants of health – from personal health-

related choices to the work environment, the natural environment, and housing among others.

Empowering Individuals Through Education and Support

Participants across all regions recognized that Canadians must *choose* to become healthy, and that this decision, and the actions that stem from it, are largely driven by information and awareness. Several participants talked about Canadians being able to make "informed choices". According to participants, Canadians should be made aware of the importance of being healthy and the ramifications of not being healthy, if they are to make the decision to change their behaviour. Citizens talked about public education as a means to achieve a wide array of goals, including keeping the natural environment clean and safe, healthy children, and reducing health problems in certain at-risk populations.

Participants also used words like "encouraging" and "promoting" good health, with implications for education campaigns and advertising that "sell" good health and healthy choices.

There was also discussion about making information available to Canadians in general and to at-risk populations, in particular. This would include information systems being made readily accessible (with people knowing where to go for information), so that people can find out what they need to know, when they need to know it.

Shared Responsibility

While emphasizing the importance of personal choices, participants also recognized that public education alone cannot ensure healthy choices – appropriate supports must be in place so that Canadians have the ability and encour-

agement to make healthy choices (e.g., choices that are both affordable and easy to make). Many of the public health goals developed through the dialogue stressed the need for government and private sector involvement and support, in addition to the efforts of individual citizens to achieve good health.

Universality/Equality of Access

Threaded throughout the dialogues, and reiterated in the closing comments, were participants' views about the importance of universality. In discussing public health goals, they suggested programs and policies that could become means to achieving universality or equality across all Canadians, and would often prefaced their goals with qualifiers such as "broadly accessible", "affordable", "available" and "every Canadian".

In particular, participants expressed concern with economic disparities and the need to "bridge the gap" between rich and poor. It was felt that all Canadians should be able to benefit equally from opportunities for fitness, nutrition, healthy lifestyles and any public health programs offered in relation to these.

Stewardship – Leaving a Legacy

An element that was often evident in participants' comments during the dialogue process was a sense of stewardship. This was particularly important in the development of public health goals related to the healthy development of children and goals related to the natural environment. In describing their aspirations related to these goals, participants argued for strategies to promote health today that would pay dividends also for the adults of tomorrow and for future generations.

Accountability, Trust and Coordination

Related to shared responsibility and underlying some of the discussions about goals in the western sessions, is the importance of achieving better coordination and management of an effective public health system. This includes coordinated health surveillance that effectively integrates Canadian informa-

tion with information on global health threats and, ensuring that practitioners are able to access and apply public health information. Coordination of jurisdictions (e.g., roles and responsibilities) and integration of service delivery (across governments, as well as between government and industry, and citizens) were also emphasized to more effectively achieve public health goals. Along with this were discussions about the need for governments to be accountable to the public on the directions and progress made in the area of public health, as well as a sense of urgency - that some fairly significant progress needs to be made in the short term and medium term in the area of public health.

Public Health Goals

Creating a Safe Natural Environment	Protect Canada's water, air and land Help reduce pollution globally Educate Canadians about the impacts of the environment on health and healthy environmental practices
Creating a Healthy Next Generation of Canadians	Make the health of children a priority – as the generation of tomorrow Focus on fitness and nutrition – addressing childhood obesity Education, programs and support through families, schools and community, spanning from prenatal to childhood
Addressing the Gaps – Focusing on Vulnerable Populations	Ensure that public health education, information and programs are accessible to all Canadians and that public health goals are inclusive of all Canadians
Encouraging Canadians to Make Healthy Choices (and Providing them with the Opportunities to do so)	Encourage Canadians to lead healthy lifestyles, and support them in achieving these goals Emphasize the importance of fitness in schools, workplaces and in the community, and make fitness accessible Emphasize the importance of nutrition and make nutritious foods more affordable and accessible
Safe and Healthy Physical Environments	Ensure that schools, workplaces, homes and public spaces are safe and healthy
Prepared for Emergency/Crisis	Ensure that government and other organizations are able to minimize disasters and respond quickly in the event of an emergency/crisis (including natural, man-made disaster or disease outbreak)
Reducing Drug Dependency	Reducing the number of Canadians who are dependent on legal and illegal drugs, and minimizing the health effects of addictions.

Creating a Safe Natural Environment

In all the regional sessions, a cluster of public health priorities emerged that related to the integrity of the natural environment, typically defined to include water, air and food supply (e.g., fertile soil). The level of specificity of goals varied significantly across the groups, with some adopting a broad approach: "protection of/provision for basic needs and natural resources", and others being more specific: improving the quality and affordability of public transportation; reducing industrial/agri-

cultural waste; sustaining and maintaining fresh water supply and fertile soil).

Acknowledging an important international component to environmental protection, participants talked about Canada's public health goals as including protection of not only our own resources, but also advocacy in international forums. They acknowledged that the creation and control of pollution is a global problem that requires addressing pollution coming from other countries, as well as our own.

Like other goals, there was a public education component suggested in some of the natural environment goals. For example, there was considerable discussion around educating Canadians about practices they can undertake as individuals to preserve the natural environment and increasing public awareness of the environmental impacts on health. It was also acknowledged, however, that some behaviours could be harder to adopt than others, particularly where it makes life somewhat more difficult, and that government has a leadership role to play, and may have to make some tough choices in enforcing strong laws, to protect the environment.

Many of the goal statements proposed by participants referred to the development, implementation and enforcement of highest standard guidelines to protect the natural environment and food quality.

Creating a Healthy Next Generation of Canadians

A common theme or cluster across almost all of the regional sessions related specifically to children, as a separate segment. For example, healthy child development, or children were specifically identified as a target group within a broader cluster such as community development. Public health goals pertaining to children spanned from prenatal care to the needs of school-age children. Significant concern was raised in all of the groups about the fitness and nutritional habits of the current generation of young people and rates of obesity.

Public health goals for children and families were identified by participants as a responsibility to future generations, and therefore a high priority. They noted that instilling healthy values and practices early will ensure that the adults of tomorrow will make wise and healthy choices. Participants also reasoned that a focus on children, particularly using the schools as a delivery vehicle, provides “the best bang for the buck” in terms of reaching a generation of Canadians.

The goal of healthy development of children led participants to consider a wide array of supportive policies and programs, including extended parental

leaves, and supporting parents’ choice to remain at home with children/ recognition and/or compensation of stay-at-home parents, and ensuring that prospective parents are educated in health matters pertaining to prenatal, infancy and early childhood.

Addressing the Gaps – Focusing on “At Risk” Populations

Building on the overarching value of universality and equity, participants identified a need for a particular focus on vulnerable populations within Canada to ensure that public health goals are inclusive of all Canadians, and in particular, to ensure that no group is left behind. This theme arose out of the realization and concern that health outcomes and access to health programs may not be equitable for all Canadians. Articulated goals included ensuring that the most basic needs of Canadians be met, since these needs must be met before individuals can aspire to fulfilling other goals. This included access to suitable shelter, food and clothing.

Protection of the more vulnerable members of society is another theme or goal that was discussed in most sessions. These discussions centered around alleviating the effects of poverty, equal access to health care, ensuring equal access to healthy lifestyle choices, free/ easier access to higher education, prenatal care are all identified as goals or means of protecting vulnerable groups which can include the poor, low income groups, new immigrants, Aboriginal Canadians, etc. Participants in a number of groups also identified the importance of public education or information targeted at vulnerable populations in attempting to achieve public health goals.

Many participants also identified Canada’s aging population, and the health of this demographic group as a concern, and identified support for seniors as a theme or goal, including assistance to families caring for aging members at home, access to health care and medication, and other services to support the aging members of our society.

Encouraging Canadians to Make Healthy Choices (and Providing them with the Opportunities to do so)

A common theme emerging from all sessions is the need to encourage or incite Canadians to make healthy lifestyle choices day to day, and to ensure that the supports are there to make these choices possible or easier. Citizens envision a population that is fit, active, eats well, participates fully in activities in their community. Again emphasizing public education, participants expressed concern that Canadians are not as knowledgeable as they could or should be about nutrition and healthy eating, and that Canadians are not engaging in physical fitness to the extent that they should.

With respect to fitness, participants talked about the importance of making physical fitness available and a part of daily routine in schools and workplace, and free access to physical fitness activities and facilities for all Canadians. Some participants expressed a particular concern for the level of physical education within the education system/curriculum, which is perceived to have waned in recent years.

Related to nutrition and healthy food choices, participants articulated goals such as Canadians eating healthier; making nutritious food more accessible; equalizing the cost of healthy food (by making healthy food more affordable and junk food more expensive); increasing knowledge and awareness of nutrition and advantages of a healthy diet. Related to this is making poorer health choices more difficult, including higher prices on junk food and the stricter rules about placement of vending machines (e.g., in schools). Access to and emphasis on the importance of nutritious foods in schools, daycares, and in the workplace were also identified as important.

Safe and Healthy Physical Environments

In addition to healthy natural environments and programs that are supportive of healthy lifestyle choices, participants in all sessions recognized the importance of ensuring Canadians are sur-

rounded by safe and healthy physical environments. Healthy physical environments were identified as important in the prevention of injury and illness, and as important in meeting the basic needs of Canadians. Health and safety in the workplace, the home and schools were each discussed by participants.

Practical implementation ideas included eliminating unsafe workplace practices and ensuring minimum standards of working conditions (including hours of work and work-life balance), controlling dangerous substances, as well as ensuring safety of products used by consumers, and healthy Industrial standards. Injury prevention was also discussed within the context of regulatory standards and in terms of public education.

Prepared for Emergency/Crisis

There was widespread consensus that the government should be able to respond quickly and effectively to emergency crises, and participants in all sessions but Quebec City identified this as an important theme or goal for public health. There was a shared belief that Canada has been ill prepared to deal with emergencies in the past and, therefore, should make emergency response a priority. Participants talked about achieving these goals through the development of emergency plans, coordination and sharing of information, and public education. They were particularly concerned about two key areas: responding to disasters; and responding to disease.

In terms of disasters this included not only natural disasters (Tsunami in 2004), but also man made disasters (Walkerton), and terrorist attacks (recent London bombings).

There was significant recognition that the spread of infectious disease is a growing concern with the increasing inter-connectedness of the world. Many cited the spread of SARS as an example, although the Avian Flu and West Nile virus were also mentioned.

Reducing Drug Dependency

Participants in some sessions were fairly concerned about the number of Canadians who are dependant on legal and illegal drugs. Legal drugs included tobacco, and (to a lesser extent) prescription drugs.

In reaching these goals, participants talked about public education and community support (e.g., better treatment centres).

Final Comments and Advice

Across the regions, participants provided positive feedback about their dialogue experience saying it was enjoyable and interesting. Most appreciated the opportunity to be engaged in important issues for Canadians.

Participants also expressed surprise that Canadians from different areas and backgrounds share such similar views when it comes to public health and public health goals and priorities, and how quickly and easily the group was able to reach a consensus about public health issues.

Many felt the sessions were also an excellent learning opportunity, and in particular, that the presentations were very useful in defining and providing a clear understanding of public health, which was pivotal in helping to identify concrete goals.

By far participants' most common message to decision-makers was to urge them to act, with a hope that their efforts would be given serious consideration in the development of public health goals. Participants often coupled these sentiments with a call for immediate action ("less talk, more action", "listen to the citizens and act", "take this to heart and pick the top items and do something", "what are you waiting for?", "hurry up and do it", "do not shelve this", "please do something with this", "honour the discussion"). They also recommended that decision-makers "keep things simple".

In one group, some participants advised decision-makers to be specific enough in their articulation of goals ("be more specific and not so broad", "try not to be so general").