

Institute of Population and Public Health

Thanks to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the year 2000 marked a promising new opportunity for the health of all Canadians. On December 5, 2000, I assumed the lead role for the CIHR Institute of Population and Public Health (IPPH) as its Scientific Director. Since that time – guided by the strategic directions set out by CIHR – many creative ideas have come to life through the programs of the 13 CIHR Institutes.

Because IPPH integrates “population” and “public” health, two complementary and overlapping areas of health research, our mission is “supporting research into the complex interactions (biological, social, cultural, environmental) which determine the health of individuals, communities and global populations; and the application of that knowledge to improve the health of both populations and individuals, through strategic partnerships with population and public health (PPH) stakeholders, and innovative research funding programs.”

The Strategic Plan

Based on this mission and with the skilled assistance of members of our Institute Advisory Board, the IPPH has developed an ambitious strategic plan for the next five years (2002-07). Our vision is built around five strategic research priorities: (1) capacity building; (2) understanding and addressing the impacts of physical and social environments on health; (3) analyzing and reducing health disparities; (4) identifying environmental and genetic determinants of disease; and (5) improving global health. There is, however, one overarching goal: to turn Canada into a world leader in innovative, interdisciplinary population and public health research.

The Canadian PPH research community is a vast one geographically and very diverse in terms of health research disciplines. The transdisciplinary challenge for the next five years will be to identify and develop priorities for Canadian PPH researchers by working together with policy-makers, program administrators and practitioners. These are largely professionals with a variety of backgrounds and experience who work in academia, government and non-governmental organizations, at national, provincial, territorial, regional and local levels.

During Fall 2001 the Institute, together with the Canadian Institute of Health Information (CIHI), engaged in a pan-Canadian consultation tour with the expressed purpose of contacting stakeholders and receiving their input. Consultation session turnouts demonstrated that our Canadian PPH research community is working in a wide variety of settings, including schools of medicine, nursing, dentistry and rehabilitation science, as well as specific PPH-related departments within our universities. Also strategically involved are researchers, doctors, scientists and educators from the social sciences and other non-health-science

university departments; teaching hospitals; independent research institutes; federal, provincial and territorial government departments whose mandates relate to PPH; and non-profit organizations dedicated to making positive change within known determinants of health, as well as engaging in PPH research and analysis.

The policy development community for population and public health in Canada is our essential partner in implementing IPPH's strategic plan. This community includes representatives from the federal, provincial and territorial ministries of health and/or social services; regional and local community health and social planning councils; and federal, provincial and territorial policy “think tanks” focused on public and population health policy. Of course, public health practitioners are the front-line workers. They are found delivering services and programs throughout public health units, regional health authorities, community health centres and PPH-related professional associations across the country.

Partnering For a Healthier Future

The partnership plans of IPPH are ambitious on all fronts. No single CIHR Institute works alone. Since day one the 13 Scientific Directors have embarked on innovative, collaborative health research efforts where clear communication is imperative – internally as well as externally. IPPH's strategic plan addresses these liaisons. Our Institute is working with other CIHR Institutes on issues related to tobacco control, rural and northern health, global health, environmental health and health disparities, as well as other initiatives.

On the external front, IPPH is developing a number of partnerships. The Canadian Institute for Health Information – Canadian Population Health Initiative (CPHI), together with IPPH, is advancing a coordinated agenda for PPH research and knowledge exchange in Canada. Knowledge translation is critical for the advancement of this scientific agenda; research that informs policy and practice also expands the knowledge frontier.

On the international front, IPPH is the lead CIHR Institute working to form a national global health research coalition. IPPH, the International Development Research Centre, the Canadian International Development Agency and Health Canada have all signed a memorandum of understanding to form a national Coalition for Global Health Research. This agreement will provide a framework for working together towards a coordinated global health research agenda. Non-governmental agencies are also involved, such as the Canadian Society for International Health (CSIH), the Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), as well as partners in developing countries and international health agencies around the world.

IPPH is actively highlighting the importance of strengthening public health infrastructure within the Canadian health system through discussions with the federal, provincial and territorial ministries of health. Many agencies, including these ministries, share IPPH's interest in further developing existing population health databases so that researchers and policy-makers can have better access to real-time information on Canadians' health status. IPPH will work closely with CIHR's Institute of Health Services and Policy Research in achieving this goal. Roundtable meetings will provide a forum for ongoing dialogues among Health Canada, Statistics Canada, CPHI at CIHI, IPPH, other CIHR Institutes and non-governmental agencies. Finally, the Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada is committed to developing sustainable linkages with IPPH in order to develop and execute a national occupational health research agenda.

Closing Thoughts

There is plenty of work to do in the next few years, but I have full confidence that IPPH will succeed in achieving its goals. Communicating our ideas through CIHR's website (<http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca>) and other media is the first step, but it is ultimately through supporting bright Canadian health researchers and engaging the interest of PPH research users across the country that we will realize the vision of the IPPH.

We have embarked on a new millennium full of promise for Canadian health research. It is a time of great excitement and discovery. CIHR's vision of a better future for Canadians can be realized; population-level improvements in the health of this country are within our reach.

About the Author:

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