

Striking the public health balance



The April 11th release of Justice Campbell's second interim report, *SARS and Public Health Legislation*, reignited discussion and debate about Ontario's state of readiness in the event

of another – or larger – public health outbreak.

Indeed, this issue's cover feature (p. 12) asks the questions on everyone's mind as rumblings of a pending pandemic flu outbreak gain momentum. Did we heed the lessons of SARS? Are Ontario's plans for handling a pandemic outbreak up-to-snuff?

For its part, Ontario's nursing community – more specifically the Emergency Nursing Advisory Committee (ENAC) – has been hard at work since SARS rocked Ontario's health-care system in 2003. During the SARS outbreak, RNAO formed the SARS Nursing Advisory Committee (SNAC) so that the key nursing organizations in Ontario could respond to that outbreak in a coordinated fashion. SNAC provided valuable support to nurses in all roles and sectors, enabling nurses to provide necessary health-care services to Ontarians.

SNAC was later renamed ENAC and is now a vital link between government and the nursing profession in times of emergency. ENAC continues to meet regularly and has developed guidelines that will support nurses, and communicate timely, accurate information to nurses and nursing students in all sectors should a local, provincial or federal emergency be declared. These guidelines, which will be reviewed regularly, address a wide range of the communications deficiencies nurses experienced during SARS

by spelling out specific protocols such as:

- Activating immediate communication between the chair of ENAC (Doris Grinspun) and the director of the Emergency Management Unit (Allison Stuart) in anticipation of or following declaration of a provincial emergency, and convening an ENAC teleconference within 24 hours of declaration of emergency.
- Activating the Voluntarily Immediately Available Nurse (VIANurse) upon government directive.
- Activating the emergency plan to place nursing students in appropriate clinical areas for the purpose of continuing to meet clinical learning needs and/or to provide clinical support.
- Linking chief nursing officers and heads of nursing programs in all relevant sectors to ensure communication flow.
- Activating the emergency response plans to support the psychosocial needs of nurses.
- Distributing government directives to nurses in a coordinated and timely fashion.
- Conducting formal evaluations of management effectiveness and responsiveness to emergencies.
- Reviewing and revising emergency plans on the basis of those evaluations.

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While these guidelines are an essential step in the right direction, they are but one part of a much larger – municipal, provincial and national – emergency planning process underway across Canada. And, they address only a portion of what must be public health's role and responsibility. The central role of public health – health promotion and disease prevention with an emphasis on determinants of health – cannot, and must not, be forgotten as we strive for emergency preparedness.

The SARS outbreak underscored the fact that Canada's public health system lacks the capacity to anticipate and respond to new threats and has insufficient surge capacity to respond to short-term crises. However, shoring up our beleaguered public health system is more than a matter of reacting to new threats. Canadians need and deserve an integrated public health system that serves to prevent, manage and control illnesses and emergencies, and is able to help individuals and communities achieve and maintain health.

We strongly believe that a renewed emphasis on public health must ensure we are better prepared to prevent and respond to public health threats, and it must buy real transformation by focusing on health promotion in the broadest sense: eradicating poverty (after all, we are one of the richest nations in the world); ensuring every person has a permanent address with a roof over his/her head; closing the gap between rich and poor by addressing income distribution; increasing minimum wage and enhancing employment opportunities; increasing access to education; and creating healthy schools so our children can achieve their potential.

We must strike a balance between the need to prevent and react to health-care threats while focusing on a broad and ambitious agenda for public health. Public health has long been the orphan of our health-care system. SARS was a wake-up call that must be answered. Canadians need and deserve an integrated public health system with national standards and clearly defined outcome benchmarks; we need a system that protects us at all times, including emergencies.

And above all else, we need a system that helps us achieve and maintain our health and well-being.

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