

Keeping public health top-of-mind



Just before officially assuming the role of president, I represented RNAO at a fundraising event in Toronto called *The Coldest Night*. Hosted by the Homes First Foundation, which raises funds for one of the city's largest alternative providers of one-stop supportive, non-profit housing and support services for the chronically homeless, the event served as a venue to raise awareness of the complicated health and housing challenges of this marginalized population.

It was an important event for me to attend given my passion and RNAO's commitment for ongoing promotion and improved awareness and advocacy on behalf of all of Ontario's marginalized citizens.

Events like this fundraiser, and stories like the cover feature in this issue of the *Journal*, remind people of the importance of recognizing the correlation between social determinants of health, such as housing, and the public health of all citizens.

According to a recently released Health Canada study entitled *The Social Determinants of Health: An Overview of the Implications for Policy and the Role of the Health Sector*, "In terms of health of populations, it is well known that disparities (i.e. the size of the gap or inequality in social and economic status between groups within a given population) greatly affect the health status of the whole. The larger the gap, the lower the health status of the overall population."

To recognize housing as an influence on public health is vital for nurses, especially at a time when we as a country embark on what is perhaps one of the most important periods of policy development regarding public health in Canada.

On March 23, 2004, Canada's federal government released its budget and

announced the creation of the Canada Public Health Association, comprised of a national network of centres across the country that will act as locations for disease control and emergency response. This is an exciting first step to better public health in our country, and one that RNAO believes should raise awareness and help to tackle the challenging correlation between health and the social, economic and political determinants that influence it.

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These external influences on lifestyle and health inevitably affect the way nurses in all health-care sectors do their jobs. They affect nurses' ability to consider broad issues when promoting health and preventing disease.

They also influence the political and advocacy agenda of RNAO.

So much of RNAO's advocacy and educational work can be tied to health promotion and building better public health. Keeping an issue like homelessness on the political agenda ensures it remains top-of-mind, and enables us to maintain a productive dialogue with policy makers as well as pressure for solutions that lead to the best health outcomes for Ontarians.

As my predecessor, Adelaine Falk-Rafael, so succinctly put it in her column entitled *Understanding what keeps us healthy* (Sept/Oct 2002 *Registered Nurse Journal*), "There is consensus within the global health promotion community that at least 13 factors are prerequisites to health: peace; shelter; education; food; income; a stable ecosystem; sustainable resources; social justice; equity; social security; social relations; empowerment of women; and respect for human rights."

We must continue to keep these health determinants at the forefront of our discussions and debates at decision-making tables.

As your new president, I intend to continually address these primary determinants of health whenever I speak. I will ensure the issues of marginalized populations are raised at all forums, especially when talking to politicians. With persistence and passion, we can challenge the status quo and ensure accountability from our elected officials.

Health Canada's recent study notes that in the past "the health sector has been reluctant to champion policies that improve social conditions because areas of social and economic policy largely fall outside the health department's jurisdiction. There has been some reluctance to step on toes and to explore ways of collaborating across sectors."

In my view, stepping on toes is vital if we are to see change.

And this column is just the beginning.

It's my promise to the nurses of Ontario, and to the clients we all serve, that I will be a messenger for the marginalized. And I will remind everyone I meet that poverty, inadequate housing, declining incomes, social justice, and the increasing gap between the rich and the poor in this country are as interconnected to our health as the medical services we all rely on when we get sick.

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