

Building Bridges and Public Policy
May 30, 2006

Remarks by Dr. David McKeown

I've been asked to speak about the role of Toronto Public Health in creating a healthy city - but in so doing I hope to make it clear that Public Health can only create healthier communities by working with others - and when it comes to chronic disease prevention, the others are you.

The principle mandate, and biggest role of Toronto Public Health is as a large provider of preventive health services in the community. Although this is our main role, it is not always our most visible. Ask yourself how often you thought of public health inspectors before we started putting up those red, yellow and green signs on restaurant doors. It goes with the territory for anyone in the prevention business that some of your best work goes unnoticed. However, we know that our work with individuals, with families, and communities is one of our great strengths, and it grounds us in the day to day health and life of this city.

But we are more than a service provider. Since the first public health service was created in Toronto over 120 years ago, public health workers have

recognized that if we really want to influence health, if we want to change the health landscape of an entire city, then providing health services alone is not enough - we must create the conditions in which health can flourish.

Toronto's early public health advocates faced different health threats than we do today - most people then became sick and died as a result of communicable diseases. But those early advocates sought the same solutions that we do - clean environments, strong social networks, adequate incomes, and strong public education, supported by what we would today call healthy public policy.

When I think about our current struggles for healthy public policy, I find it helpful to look back to the achievements of those who came before us. When I hear restaurant operators express fear for their livelihood when local bylaws make their businesses smoke free, I remember that early in the last century dairy farmers marched on Toronto City Hall to protest the mandatory pasteurization of milk, which they thought no-one would buy.

Creating healthy communities through public policy has always been a collective activity. The Cancer Prevention Coalition named this event Building Bridges and Public Policy, and they named it well. It is rare that one

organization or individual can build sufficient community consensus to move policy. Bridges must be built. Knowing this, the Coalition has created a big tent. Its members are governments, health professionals, hospitals, universities, unions, NGOs, activists and survivors who share a common goal of preventing the diseases which now lead to a quarter of all deaths. We are all working together for the public's health, even if only one organization is given the name.

I don't have to tell you that creating healthy communities through public policy can be a slow and sometimes discouraging business. It is important, therefore, to celebrate our successes.

Today we are on the eve of a great achievement in chronic disease prevention in Ontario. Tonight at midnight, province wide legislation takes effect which will protect the public and workers from environmental tobacco smoke in communities small and large across the province, some of which have had very little healthy public policy in this area. This legislation is accompanied by provincial support for health promotion and smoking cessation services which will further the goal of a smoke-free Ontario in which fewer families suffer the tragedy of smoking related cancer and cardiorespiratory illness.

This achievement has come about only after years of persistent appeals for provincial action, and struggle in the trenches of municipal councils, community meetings, media briefings, and letter-writing campaigns. Many of the leaders and foot-soldiers in that struggle are here today, and you should be proud of what you have done for the health of people in Ontario.

There have been other recent successes, too, for chronic disease prevention. Air pollution leads to 6000 hospital admissions and 1700 deaths each year in Toronto. As a result of an enormous effort by many partners, we now have a provincial public policy commitment to phase out coal-fired power generation in Ontario by 2009, thus eliminating the largest sources of air pollution in the province, with health benefits for all of us. In Toronto, and increasingly in other communities, we have bylaws aimed at reducing unnecessary pesticide use. My staff who enforce the Toronto bylaw tell me that there have been significant reductions in pesticide use, and I see it in my own neighbourhood. I am confident that in time we will see province-wide action on this as well.

Public Health has played a role, sometimes a lead role, in many of these efforts. But in each case, collaboration between many partners was essential for success, and will be needed to sustain achievements.

Toronto Public Health has reaffirmed its commitment to be a Champion for public health in our strategic plan - which is named Toward a Healthy City and which is included in your package. I am confident that you will challenge us anytime you think we are not living up to that commitment.

One of the most important features of this plan is the importance that it places on reducing health inequalities. Toronto is home to some of the healthiest, and some of the least healthy neighbourhoods in Canada. The risk of chronic disease in particular, varies substantially depending on who you are, what you earn, and where you live. As you discuss strategies for chronic disease prevention today, I challenge you to choose approaches which will close these gaps and create a more equal opportunity for health.

This is a working conference, and Toronto Public Health will be working with you today as we learn together from our past successes and failures, and identify the best opportunities to advance our shared agenda for the prevention of chronic disease.

Thank you very much.