



VOICES FROM THE FIELD - A Policy Perspective on the Importance of Nutrition throughout the Lifecycle

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Policy perspective

The importance of nutrition throughout the lifecycle is stressed in the three papers by Devaney,¹ Black² and Reifsnider.³ Devaney¹ describes the American Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), which provides services to improve the nutritional status of pregnant women and children. Devaney¹ concludes that research on the effectiveness of the WIC program suggests positive effects but also highlights the difficulty of measuring program impacts. Black² provides information on eating problems in children and describes environmental influences on children's eating habits. Reifsnider³ pinpoints the importance of improving nutrition among women of child-bearing age and their children rather than focusing solely on nutrition during pregnancy and the postpartum period. This commentary will focus on Canada's efforts to address nutrition from a population health perspective, highlighting work underway to bridge gaps between policy and research.

In Canada, nutrition for healthy growth and development is addressed through the broad lens of a population health perspective. The document *Nutrition for Health: An Agenda for Action*⁴ builds on the Framework for Population Health by providing a model for addressing nutrition issues in communities across Canada. The population health perspective recognizes that health is determined not only by health care and personal health practices, but also by other social, economic and physical factors called determinants of health.

For example, in the document *Nutrition for a Healthy Pregnancy: The National Guidelines for the Childbearing Years*,⁵ women's health and nutrition are addressed from a population health perspective. The guidelines not only focus on nutrition during pregnancy but also provide guidance on how to optimize health before, during and between pregnancies. The document recognizes that the availability of foods and an individual's capacity to make food choices are greatly influenced by the determinants of health.

Food choices, which play a direct role in nutritional health, significantly influence health status. Taking personal responsibility for one's health is important; however, food choices are not simply a matter of personal choice. It is essential to remember when developing

policies and programs for Canadians of all ages that economic and social forces, together with factors related to the physical environment, influence what foods are available and a person's individual capacity to make choices.

Actions by policy-makers and community leaders must consider all determinants of health and must be based on a foundation that includes research, information and public policy. A collaborative approach to nutrition policy development is also favoured since decisions related to health, agriculture, education, social and economic policies affect nutritional health. Nutrition is an issue that forms part of the mandate of many organizations, both government and non-government, serving as a component of health programs that target settings, life stages, vulnerable populations, disease prevention and health promotion. Provinces and territories play a critical role in promoting nutritional health and well-being at the community level. While many programs vary from province to province and between communities, many build upon standards and guidelines developed collaboratively at the national level, such as *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*.⁶

Policies and programs that support healthy eating and enhance population health require sound evidence as well as the capacity to measure progress and outcomes. Currently, the available evidence regarding what Canadians are eating, the determinants of eating behaviour and the effectiveness of current interventions to support healthy eating is weak, which concurs with some of the challenges mentioned by Devaney and Reifsnider.^{1,3} Monitoring the nutritional health of Canadians has been hampered by a lack of national and ongoing surveillance data to assess the impact of policy and regulatory decisions. Data from the Canadian Community Health Survey (Cycle 2.2 Nutrition Focus) will offer a rich dataset through which actual dietary intake by Canadians of all ages will be analyzed. This dataset will provide evidence on the dietary intakes and eating patterns of Canadians to better inform food and nutrition policies and programs.

Evolving nutrition research in Canada is critical not only for women of child-bearing age and their children but for both genders and all age groups. This can only be accomplished by enhancing the capacity to undertake such research. The importance of considering an appropriate paradigm of evidence pertinent to the constructs of an upstream population health approach (health promotion and disease prevention) rather than individual lifestyle approaches should be recognized. A series of synthesis papers on the determinants of healthy eating, including both individual and collective determinants and their interactions, was commissioned by Health Canada's Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion (ONPP) to inform policy-makers on key knowledge and research gaps. In order to facilitate the dissemination and knowledge transfer of key findings to a multi-disciplinary audience, ONPP, its provincial partners and Canadian Institutes of Health Research's Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism and Diabetes are coordinating the publication of a special journal supplement on the determinants of healthy eating. The next step will be to bridge the gaps between research, practice and policy by engaging researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in a dialogue for action on moving forward a research agenda designed to promote and support healthy eating at all ages.

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