



Cynthia Morton  
Deputy Minister of Health Promotion  
18th Floor, 777 Bay Street  
Toronto, Ontario  
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May 20, 2008

Dear Ms Morton:

***Re: Childhood Obesity Surveillance Proposal***

Overall, the proposal is a step in the right direction towards establishing an obesity strategy for Ontario. Surveillance is an important aspect of any comprehensive health promotion strategy and is a missing link in our understanding of childhood obesity as we currently have no solid baselines established. The Registered Nurses Association (RNAO) of Ontario has created a 'Primary Prevention of Childhood Obesity' Best Practice Guideline (BPG) which helped inform our comment.

The Ministry of Health Promotion Deputy Minister should be commended for making the effort to seek counsel via the Working Group on Childhood Obesity Surveillance for Ontario. The recommendations, discussion & rationale are not only based on sound research, but also include an outline of activities currently or recently employed in various Ontario health units from which successes & learning's could be gleaned. Some specific thoughts about the document include:

- Surveillance is a component of an obesity strategy and NOT an obesity strategy in and of itself. This document could be renamed to reflect that it is a proposal for surveillance which is a component of an obesity strategy (e.g. '*The need for a childhood weights and risk factors surveillance system as **a component of an obesity strategy for Ontario***').
- There are no statements that either physical activity or eating/food/nutrition measures would be key areas of measurement for a comprehensive surveillance system. Only weight is considered the key area of measurement. Address the concern that neither physical activity nor eating/food/nutrition measures would be key areas of measurement for a comprehensive surveillance system. Detail the problems and concern as to how this would be done or whether a direct measure exists.
- Surveillance is an important component of addressing the "childhood obesity" issue but also is one that requires very sensitive thinking regarding the approach. Ethical issues such as consent, confidentiality, perpetuating misunderstandings about weight, potential emphasis on weight interpretation, potential teasing and bullying, and most importantly, what follow-up will happen for children identified at risk? What impact on the child, family, system? Are we doing more harm than good?

It is clear that the issues related to ethical considerations are of paramount concern. In the development of the RNAO Best Practice Guideline, there was care taken to ensure that the

recommendations didn't focus on "blaming" the child or family, but rather focused on a community approach.

- Recommendation # 3 states that a comprehensive surveillance system is desired and would include measures of factors 'that contribute' to the development of childhood obesity such as physical activity/fitness, nutrition status, eating behaviours, body image, and the social and environmental factors". This recommendation is consistent with the RNAO's Primary Prevention of Childhood Obesity Best Practice Guideline Recommendation 2: The inclusion of "eating behaviours, body image, and the social and environmental factors" is consistent with the focus within the guideline on the impact of society on obesity.

The document very nicely defines & compares the activities of "surveillance" vs. "screening", as well as considers their implications. There seems to be a predominant focus on surveillance of individuals; there is a noticeable lack of reference to surveillance on environmental supports, which we know is a significant determinant of childhood obesity. Recommendation 11 supports The RNAO Recommendation 15 from the Primary Prevention of Childhood Obesity Best Practice Guideline related to the need for a focus on the social determinants of health and their impact on obesity. The need for a clearer understanding of the impact of the social determinants of health on the risks for obesity and chronic disease is clear.

- Recommendation #10 states that a "Surveillance Steering Committee (would) determine best measures for nutrition and physical activity. However, these measures would receive only "appropriate incorporation" into a comprehensive surveillance system.

The recommendations are broad and will require further efforts by the Ministry of Health Promotion and Surveillance Steering Committee to make decisions about how to implement.

Overall, the proposal appears to address the key elements related to surveillance that are identified in the RNAO BPG. However, the focus seems to be exclusively at the level of the individual children, without looking at the larger issues of systems, design of communities etc.

The complexity of factors that influence the development of childhood overweight and obesity at individual, family and population levels needs to be considered. This may be addressed in subsequent work, but in the proposal, these key elements do not seem to be clearly linked, or recognized in terms of their importance.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. We trust you will find the above information helpful as you move forward with this very important initiative.

With warm regards,



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President  
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cc. Katie Dilworth, CHNIG Professional Team Leader  
Ruth Schofield, CHNIG, Past President