Role of Public Health Inspectors in Canadian Public Health

As we approach the centennial of CIPHI in 2013, I thought it would be important to briefly look back on the role of public health inspectors (PHIs) through Canadian society. Reviewing the Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) 2010 Centennial website, the Canadian Institute of Public Health Inspector's (CIPHI) own website, the CIPHI Ontario Branch's archives, and the always versatile Google, I was astonished at the breadth and depth of the contributions our profession has made to Canada's public health system over the years. I should rephrase; I was not so much astonished as struck with a sense of awe and inspiration. Sometimes you lose sight of the breadth of your profession in the organized chaos that is life, work, and family.

PHIs are trained and qualified specifically for public health. The profession was not borrowed or loaned from another field but created for the demand. It is an old profession, outdating many of the others as history records inspections of food, housing and unsanitary conditions long before the formal development of the other medical sciences. (T.E. Elliot, C.S.I.(C), President, Canadian Institute of Sanitary Inspectors, 1961)

Public Health Inspectors, Environmental Health Officers, Sanitarians. We are known by many names, many titles, and work in many fields. Yet we share a commonality; the pursuit of a safer tomorrow. Over the last 100 years, and more, PHIs have played a pivotal role in a number of public health programs and initiatives including:

- Waste water/sewage treatment – private systems to municipal sanitary sewers.
- Safe drinking water – protection of source through treatment to investigations of illness.
- Safe recreational water – injury prevention, health promotion, education and awareness, and policy development.
- Food safety – inspections of food premises, farmers' markets, and, special events; outbreak investigations, recalls, and policy development including pasteurization of milk.
- Food security – helping to protect the farm to fork continuum, recalls, outbreak investigations, awareness, and helping to make sense of nutritional labels.
- Control of infectious diseases – outbreak investigation and mitigation (*Listeria*, *E. coli*, *Salmonella*), source identification and protection, public education, investigation and control of emerging issues (e.g., personal service settings, SARS, West Nile, Lyme disease).
- Healthy environments – assessments, plan review and consulting, healthy built environments, health hazard identification and investigation.

- Emergency preparedness – planning, planning, and more planning, responding in the case of SARS and H1N1, inter-professional collaboration, and being available to answer the public's questions.

In 2010 the CPHA celebrated 100 years; part of those celebrations included the identification of 12 Great Achievements in Public Health. PHIs have been a key driving force in four of the twelve great achievements in Public Health: safer and healthier foods, control of infectious diseases, healthier environments (fluoridation of water, lead and mercury toxicity, animal waste etc.), and the recognition of tobacco use as a health hazard (control of tobacco sale, smoking in public, and education). Sometimes it is hard to formulate tangible measurement of the work we do. According to the CPHA “the average lifespan of Canadians has increased by more than 30 years since the early 1900s, and 25 of those years are attributable to advances in public health.” PHI's activities and efforts played a significant role in helping to achieve these gains in life expectancy.

We are a small, diverse, and highly skilled group of professionals dedicated to protecting the health of all Canadians through our Promotion, Prevention, and Protection activities. We toil in relative obscurity, emerging periodically into the light as a side note on a community outbreak, a closed supermarket, or some upscale condo pool being shut down. Trained in the skills of health promotion, risk assessment, risk communication, investigation, and prevention we are like referees, unnoticed when things are going well, singled out when things go astray.

Today I ask all of you to take a moment and reflect on the impact your profession has had on the health of Canadians, and reflect on the personal contributions you have made through education, promotion, and protection activities. We all should take pride in the five letters behind our names, CPHI(C). These letters are born of nearly 100 years of effort, energy, and selfless promotion of the profession. Only a select few are granted permission each year to add the CPHI(C) credential behind their name. I can only speak for myself but I take great pride in being able to put the CPHI(C) behind my name.

From time to time, we hear rumblings of the diminishing roles for PHIs in the traditional public health model. It is time for all CPHI(C) holders to extol the virtues of our chosen profession to whoever will listen. Remind your employer, friends, and family of the great accomplishments of public health and the role CPHI(C)s have played in helping to making Ontario and Canada one of the safest and greatest places to live. Challenge yourself to seek new opportunities, and take on new challenges to help move the profession forward.

I am often encouraged by the diversity and expansion of roles I hear that certified PHIs are filling. Roles including but not limited to: CAO, director, manager, supervisor, infection control practitioner, provincial manager, research specialist, environmental consultant, food safety trainer, professor, quality assurance specialist, etc. With the skill set each of us possesses I believe our profession is only limited by the depth of our creativity and marketing abilities. Each and every PHI that I know who has struck out on their own unique path has found success due to their personal drive and unparalleled skill set.

As the new millennium unfolds ahead of us, it is important that CIPHI and public health practice continue to evolve to

meet emerging needs. The Ontario Public Health Standards have increased the emphasis on health promotion, emergency preparedness and planning, healthy built environments, and health hazard investigations. Public health inspectors possess the skills and knowledge to meet these challenges head on. Our profession, long in tradition yet short on recognition, needs its members to step up and help spread the word of the great work that we do.

Ken Diplock

President, CIPHI Ontario Branch