A proposed inspector training program in Quebec

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Public health inspectors (PHIs) are currently trained through six post-secondary institutions in Canada: British Columbia Institute of Technology (Burnaby, B.C.); Concordia University (Edmonton, Alta.); First Nations University of Canada (Regina, Sask.); Conestoga College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning (Kitchener, Ont.); Ryerson University (Toronto, Ont.); and Cape Breton University (Sydney, N.S.). These schools are accredited by the CIPHI Board of Certification, and graduates may take the certification exam after completing a required practicum.

A potential change to the training landscape is now on the horizon, one that may transform Canadian environmental public health practice particularly for French-speaking inspectors. A new program at the Université de Montréal has been developed and awaits approval by Quebec's Ministry of Education. Should the program be approved, and if it were to be accredited by the CIPHI Board of Certification, it could facilitate renewed participation of Quebec environmental public health practitioners within a provincial branch. Furthermore, it would be the only French-speaking inspector training program in Canada.

Understanding the context of inspections in Quebec

The delivery of environmental health programs and services, including mandates for inspection roles, varies across Canada's provinces and territories (see "Environmental Health in Canada" section of the NCCEH.CA website). In most provinces and territories, inspection roles are embedded in the formal public health structure, with PHIs or Environmental Health Officers working directly for regional health authorities or health units. The province of Quebec presents a unique and contrasting example.

In Quebec, the public health law does not name protection roles—specifically inspections—as part of the public health structure. Instead, these roles are assigned to other ministries and in some cases, municipalities (Laliberté and Brahim, 2012). For example, food inspections are overseen by the Ministère de

l'Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation du Québec (MAPAQ).^{1,2} Protection roles for water, soil, and air are assigned to the "Ministère du Développement durable, de l'Environnement et de la Lutte contre les changements climatiques."³ Finally, municipalities oversee a variety of areas, including sanitation, safety, noises, and odours.

An analysis of the effectiveness of this particular system approach, in comparison with other provinces, is beyond the scope of this article. However, significant regional disparities do exist, both with regards to staffing numbers as well as the capacity of inspectors across Quebec (Laliberté and Brahim, 2012; Muzumdar, 2016a, 2016b).⁴

The current training profile of an "Environmental Health Professional" versus an "Inspector" in Quebec

In Quebec, the term "Environmental Health Professional" refers to individuals with a masters or doctoral degree in a related field such as environmental science, toxicology, or epidemiology, and that this term can also refer to physicians and nurses in environmental and community health roles (Laliberté and Brahim, 2012). Thus, in Quebec due to a difference in formal education and training, there is a clear distinction between "environmental health professionals" and "inspectors" (Laliberté and Brahim, 2012; Muzumdar, 2016b).

The majority of students in Quebec aspiring to inspection roles receive domain-specific technical training at the pre-university technical college level, for example, at Cégep de Sorel-Tracy. This means that inspectors' qualifications often include certificates in engineering, food safety and hygiene, or occupational health. Some Quebec inspectors are trained at the

¹Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Québec).

²Note that in the city of Montreal, food inspections are contracted by MAPAQ to the municipality.

³Ministry of Sustainable Development, Environment, and Action against Climate Change (Québec).

⁴In Quebec, a pre-university technical college is referred to as a Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel (Cégep).

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University level, participating in domain-specific programs such as McGill University's food technology program (bachelor and master's degrees) or other undergraduate programs in environmental science. Most significantly, not all Quebec inspectors are trained to analyze, interpret, and communicate health risks, or approach their work with a population health lens (Muzumdar, 2016b).

A need for improved inspector training

Dr. Audrey Smargiassi, Associate Professor at the School of Public Health, University of Montreal, has been leading the development of the potential undergraduate inspector program at the university. Dr. Smargiassi and her colleagues are largely driven by the knowledge that the majority of inspectors in Quebec do not receive broad, cross-cutting training through curricula similar to the other schools in Canada (Muzumdar, 2016b).

To determine demand for inspectors with a public health and environmental health focus in Quebec, Dr. Smargiassi and her colleagues interviewed key informants. These included division heads at the City of Montreal (fire department, water, housing, and food inspection), those who work in both environmental public health and occupational health from the Institut national de santé publique du Québec⁵ and representatives from select regional health authorities. Dr. Smargiassi and her team also consulted with "les association sectorielle paritaires" for different industries, thus including unions, representatives from nongovernmental organizations, and insurance companies (Muzumdar, 2016b). Dr. Smargiassi reported that findings reveal an overall demand for improved inspector training, particularly related to bedbugs, water infiltration, and mould, and that inspectors require additional skills to interpret and communicate relevant information (Muzumdar, 2016b).

A proposed undergraduate program at the University of Montreal

Following this assessment, Dr. Smargiassi and her colleagues proposed a new undergraduate program at the University of Montreal. The program, pending approval by the Quebec Ministry of Education, would train specialists in environmental health and occupational health and safety with a background in science and public health. Similar to the inspector training program at Ryerson University in Ontario, the proposed program would allow students to choose between specializing in occupational health and safety or environmental health. Dr. Smargiassi further described the proposed program objectives: "We want to train students such that they could identify, evaluate, control, and communicate risks to health and to safety, particularly as related to chemical, physical, biological agents; the built environment; and the work environment (occupational health)" (Muzumdar, 2016b).

Dr. Smargiassi and her colleagues aim to work in close collaboration with practitioners as the program further develops. Their intention is for the program to meet CIPHI requirements, as well as those of the Board of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals. One of the challenges, however, is that a significant proportion of a CIPHI-accredited program must be taught by certified PHIs (Muzumdar, 2016b). At present, there are very few known PHIs in Quebec. In 2012 the CIPHI Quebec branch ceased to function (CIPHI, 2012), and eight Quebec-based members—all employed by the federal government—have since joined the CIPHI New Brunswick branch (Muzumdar, 2016a). Moving forward, further consultation and collaboration with CIPHI will help to overcome this potential barrier to program implementation.

Potential impacts of an undergraduate, inspections-focused program at the University of Montreal

Should this program be approved by the Quebec Ministry of Education and be accredited by CIPHI, there are many potential impacts ranging from incremental change to more large-scale systems influence in Quebec, in Canada, and internationally (in other French-speaking countries).

Most notable for Quebec would be the improved training profile for French-speaking inspectors and the increased capacity of those who take on inspection roles in various ministries and municipalities. Another potential impact, though perhaps less immediately visible, is the eventual embedding of a network of consistently trained inspector staff across Quebec's system—one that currently appears to be fractured, and comprised of siloes. Furthermore, if the intention is for program graduates to be able to evaluate and communicate information with a public health lens, this may well help strengthen relationships and collaboration with regional health authority staff across Quebec.

There are also potential impacts on the rest of Canada: first, the establishment of such a program may provide an opening to grow relationships across Canada between Quebec inspectors and CIPHI members in other provinces; second, the program may significantly improve opportunities for native French speakers aiming to work in inspection-related roles for the federal government—positions that currently require graduation from a CIPHI-accredited program. Dr. Smargiassi commented on the importance of such an offering: "If one is Francophone, and not comfortable going to school in English, yet willing to go so far as travelling outside of Quebec for training in inspection, they have no option to do so. This limits their ability to work for the federal government or for any other province in a French or English speaking role . . . their training will never match up to an Anglophone candidate. By extension, someone who wants to be an inspector, for example, in a French-speaking community in Manitoba, would have had to have trained outside of Quebec, in English, and then perform their job predominantly in French" (Muzumdar, 2016b).

Dr. Smargiassi has also considered the possible impact of such a program on international systems capacity: "The University of Montreal and the school of public health have

⁵The Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ) is Quebec's public health institute.

close relationships with the international community. There is great potential for training individuals from French-speaking African countries, as well as others from countries in the Global South who could benefit from broad training in the area of environment, health, and inspection” (Muzumdar, 2016b).

When asked to comment on employment opportunities for graduates of this potential program, Dr. Smargiassi was optimistic: “Given the demand from both the public and private sector for inspectors who are able to analyze, interpret, and communicate information, while also evaluating health risks, we think that there will be positions for inspectors with more broad training at the undergraduate level. According to Statistics Canada and Service Canada, there is not expected to be particularly strong growth in occupational health and safety in the public sector. However, in the private sector where inspections are required as well, there is a strong increase in employer demand for services, for example, to eliminate the causes of work accidents” (Muzumdar, 2016b).

There is currently no confirmed date by which this inspector training program in Quebec will be approved by the Ministry of Education and (or) be accredited by CIPHI. The NCCEH will follow this initiative and will share updates as soon as they are available.

For information about this potential program, please contact Dr. Audrey Smargiassi, Associate Professor at the School of Public Health, University of Montreal. (email: audrey.smargiassi@umontreal.ca).

To connect with Eric Bouchard, CIPHI member and Quebec’s representative to CIPHI New Brunswick, please contact (email: eric.j.bouchard@hc-sc.gc.ca).

To learn more about environmental health structure in Quebec, information about relevant resources, or connections to public health staff within Quebec, please contact Pemma Muzumdar, part-time NCCEH Knowledge Broker and Com-

munications Coordinator for the six NCCs for Public Health, at (email: pmuzumd@stfx.ca).

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