Public Health Connects

The newsletter of the Public Health e-Health Council

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Council Sets Ambitious Agenda

Public Health e-Health Council Co-chairs enjoy a moment with members of the team before cutting a cake to celebrate the launch of the PublicHealthOntario.ca portal. Left to right: Dr. George Pasut and Dr. Sheela Basrur (Co-chairs of the Public Health e-Health Council); Mario Cordoba, PHIIT Office; Javier Castellanos, SSHA Development Team; Wayne Roberts, Portal Lead, PHIIT Office.

Inside

At its June meeting, the Public Health e-Health Council agreed to focus on nine priority projects for the 2005-06 fiscal year. These projects will improve Public Health's ability to communicate with the broader health sector, prepare for emergencies, manage disease and immunization, conduct health inspections and surveillance activities, and integrate laboratory information and other information into the public health system.

The nine projects are as follows:

- Continued Development of PublicHealthOntario.ca
- Improved Distribution of Important Health Notices
- Enhancements to the Integrated Public Health Information System (iPHIS)
- Immunization Information System
- Inspection Information System
- Improved Tools to Support Public Health Surveillance
- Integrating Lab Information into Public Health Systems
- Technology Standards Development/Specification
- Improved Knowledge Management (KM) for Public Health

The Council went through a rigorous process to select these projects. In March, the Council held a strategic planning day with representatives from public health and e-Health to identify possible initiatives for the Council to undertake. The Council then ranked an initial 27 projects on the basis of their importance and readiness for implementation. Further review narrowed the number of projects to nine, based on their context within Ontario's e-Health Strategy and framework for Public Health. The Council also asked that work plans be developed for the projects.

Future issues of *Public Health Connects* will provide more details on the projects, their progress and how they affect your work in the months and years ahead. (See **Council Priorities** for summaries of each of the projects.)

Ontario

Public Health e-Health Council Vision

By engaging public health and the broader health sector, we will provide leadership in the best use of e-Health to transform public health into an efficient, effective, integrated and highly accountable system that advances the well-being of all Ontarians.

Council Priorities

PublicHealthOntario.ca	Public Health's Internet portal is dedicated to information exchange among public health professionals. Over time, registered portal users will publish and manage their own content, collaborate in online communities, access applications such as the Integrated Public Health Information System (iPHIS) and the Ontario Drug Benefit data viewer for emergency departments (ODB-ED), and allow improved distribution of ministry Important Health Notices.
Improved Distribution of Important Health Notices	This project will create a service to publish Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care Important Health Notices to providers inside and outside of public health to support Ontario's emergency preparedness. The facility will enable providers to respond quickly to emerging developments and also support communications targeted to specific audiences (e.g., hospital labs, or long-term care home administrators) using multiple channels (e-mail, phone, pager, and fax).
Enhancements to the Integrated Public Health Information System (iPHIS)	This project will focus first on completing, by the end of 2005, the province-wide deployment of iPHIS, used for case, contact and outbreak management and for the reporting of reportable and communicable disease. iPHIS will need enhancements to fully meet requirements for managing communicable diseases. This project will create a strategy for ongoing upgrades to iPHIS and integrating it with Canada Health Infoway's development of a pan-Canadian health surveillance system.
Immunization Information System	Ontario needs better ways to capture immunization-related information, including vaccine supply chain information, to manage Ontario's immunization program and to support pandemic flu planning. Ontario projects support a current Canada Health Infoway initiative with the Government of British Columbia to define a solution specification that supports the needs of Public Health Surveillance for Immunizations.

Council Priorities (continued)	
Inspection Information System	Public health units have identified a need for improved inspection information systems to monitor new and emerging location-based health issues. Current projects are developing an overall structure for inspection information systems for tobacco, safe water and food safety.
Improved Tools to Support Public Health Surveillance	This project will identify and recommend tools to create a more flexible system for analyzing public health epidemiological data, including the ability to map data against geographic location. This will allow public health to respond more effectively to trends and will lead to better management of programs. The project will also help public health providers use information captured through the Electronic Health Record related projects currently underway through Ontario's e-Health strategy. As a first step, the project will develop a strategy for public health surveillance, including chronic diseases. This strategy will make recommendations regarding tools to support the capture, geographical mapping and storage of surveillance data, and its analysis.
Integrating Lab Information into Public Health Systems	The Ontario Laboratory Information System (OLIS) and new public health applications provide an opportunity to electronically integrate laboratory information directly into public health systems. Initially, this project will identify and recommend a strategy to integrate lab information and ensure alignment among the various applications.
Technology Standards Development/Specification	This project will create common IT architectural standards and guidelines that can be used across organizations within the public health community to support improved exchange of information.
Improved Knowledge Management (KM) for Public Health	Through the development and implementation of a broad, multi-year KM strategy, the public health sector can build its capacity to make the best possible decisions and provide the most cost-effective service to public health stakeholders.

PublicHealthOntario.ca
Advisory Committee

Left to right: Dr. Rose Bilotta, Sandra Horney, Jason Garay and Beata Pach (Chair). Missing from picture: Jeff Holmes and Dr. Patricia Huston.

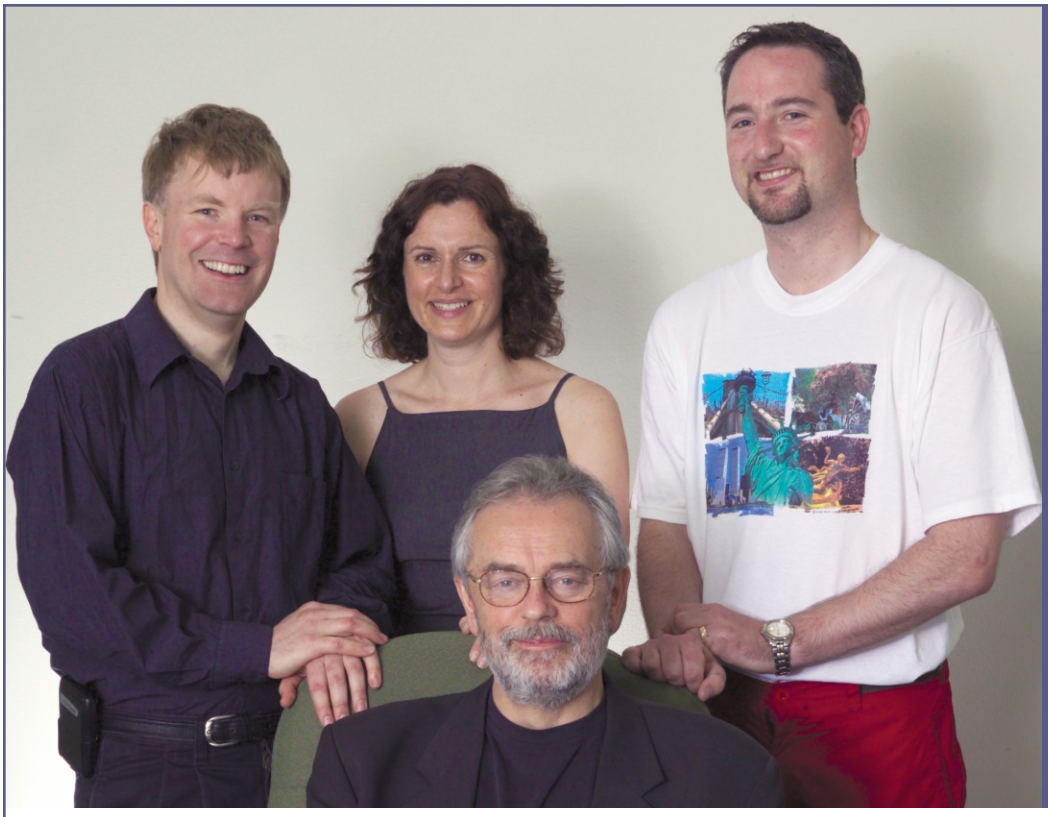
Portal Advisory Committees at Work

Secure, easy exchange of information is the goal of Portal Advisory Committees.

This April, Public Health launched two web portals to improve how public health and health care providers are able to receive, share and organize health care information. To help ensure the portals grow and evolve to support the communication needs of providers, the Public Health e-Health Council set up two committees to advise the Council and oversee portal development.

"Creating a tool that provides secure, easy access to information for public health organizations is the goal of the PublicHealthOntario.ca Portal Advisory Committee," states chair, Beata Pach. Ms. Pach, Senior Policy Analyst for the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's Strategic Planning and Implementation Branch, was involved early in the development of Public Health's web portal PublicHealthOntario.ca and, with her advisory committee members, continues to play a key role in the portal's progress. The advisory committee oversees the portal's development and implementation. It also facilitates linkages with public health stakeholders and other e-Health projects.

The eHealthOntario.ca Portal Advisory Committee functions in a similar way, but within a different structure. This advisory committee represents sectors beyond public health, such as continuing care and hospitals. Its responsibility extends to portal communications for the broader health sector. As a result, this advisory committee offers guidance to the eHealthOntario.ca Steering Committee on portal content and functionality to support effective, two-way information flow throughout the province's health system.



eHealthOntario.ca Advisory Committee

Left to right: Ian Brunskill (Chair), Camille Lemieux, Lee Bridgeford, and Mark Breen. Missing from picture: Hugh MacPhie, Arlene Howells, and Philip Edwards.

"We want to create an environment for public health and providers throughout the health care system to exchange and access information in a secure space," explains Ian Brunskill, chair of the eHealthOntario.ca Portal Advisory Committee. As executive lead for the Public Health Information and Information Technology (PHIIT) Office, Mr. Brunskill also sits on the PublicHealthOntario.ca committee to help provide a cohesiveness of thought and direction between the two committees.

Part of this cohesiveness is the focus both committees put on bringing a practical health providers' perspective to e-Health initiatives. Recommendations stem from their sector's experience and business needs for communications. As Ms. Pach points out, "Tools have to be easy to use and information readily accessible when and where it's needed." An example of this practical approach is both committees' endorsement and participation in PHIIT's Collaboration Tool Pilot.

The pilot, which extends from August through mid-December, will test the suitability of a software tool that all providers within Ontario's health system could eventually access from the portals. As pilot participants, the committees will not only be able to evaluate the application, but explore the possibilities for online collaboration and the issues arising from the introduction of online collaboration to Ontario's health providers. (Read more about the pilot in the next issue of *Public Health Connects.*)

The review of policies for publishing content on the portals and advice on risk management strategies for portal projects are other examples of subjects covered by advisory committee monthly meetings. Mario Cordoba, PHIIT Office stakeholder relations lead and secretary to both portal advisory committees sums up their role: "Committee members bring the knowledge of their business to come up with recommendations for the right type of solution."

Connecting with… Dr. Barbara Yaffe

Dr. Barbara Yaffe, Director of Communicable Disease Control and Associate Medical Officer of Health for Toronto Public Health

This is the first of a series profiling Public Health e-Health Council members and their views on opportunities for growth, development, cooperation and better integration of services within public health and Ontario's health system through e-Health.

Barbara Yaffe is absolutely passionate about the development of public health. As Director of Communicable Disease Control and Associate Medical Officer of Health for Toronto Public Health, she still manages to juggle her time with committees and activities that shape the future of public health in Ontario. Currently she is a member of the Public Health e-Health Council and also active in the rollout of the Integrated Public Health Information System (iPHIS) within her own public health unit.

As Incident Manager for the SARS outbreak in Toronto, Dr. Barbara Yaffe experienced firsthand the need for increased information technology (IT) in public health. "IT is an important tool for our work. Public health units need to have better ways to be interconnected within and outside the province, federally and internationally, and with labs, physicians and other health care providers. Without this," she emphasizes, "we can't move forward with public health."

Dr. Yaffe's interest in technology as a transformative tool for public health, however, long predates SARS. Back in 2000, she served on the Public Health Information and Strategy Advisory Committee (PHISAC). At that time, the committee recommended the need for Ontario to adopt new technology, such as iPHIS, to better manage communicable disease.

Now she is very pleased to again be part of change in public health. She also realizes that the Public Health e-Health Council needs to provide an "open and transparent process" if it is to lead the way in applying e-Health. "We need input from the field and we need to work together, particularly in regard to communicable disease control, both across the provincial system as well as locally."

An open process is only part of the picture. "This is a time of change in public health," she goes on to explain. "There is the Capacity Review, the formation of a new Public Health Agency, PIDAC, LHINs and other changes. LHINS, for example, have to interact with public health and there is also lab reform. It's important to make the connections and provide the training, too."

Right now Council is dealing with a variety of projects, such as improving the Immunization registry and the Public Health inspections system. But there's even more on the horizon, according to Dr. Yaffe. "We must cover the whole spectrum of public health. The current focus is definitely upon communicable disease, but we need to look at how to deal with chronic disease prevention and healthy families programs and services."

It's definitely a time of challenge and change. But as Dr. Yaffe points out, it's also a time of opportunity to improve communication tools and processes within the public health system.

So how do public health providers ensure they receive the tools and shape the processes in a way that's best for them? "Get involved in the development of the system," she urges. "Offer to be on provincial groups or help out in your own public health unit with the rollout of new technologies."

Public health is a busy, demanding job and Dr. Yaffe recognizes that it's not always possible to take an active role in every provincial initiative. But as she has learned in her more than 20 years in public health, being involved not only helps you to get more of what you need to do your job well, but also can have a profound effect on the future of public health.

In Summary

Key action points from recent Public Health e-Health Council meetings:

Creating a framework for strategic direction

This past spring, the Council focused on building a framework for strategic thinking and action that allows the Council to consider long-term goals, based on their measurable positive impact, and public health's capacity to attain those goals, sustain and build upon them. The lynchpin for this framework is the Council's own vision of leadership in the best use of e-Health for an efficient, effective, integrated and highly accountable system of public health.

To help the Council engage public health and health care providers in providing input into various e-Health initiatives, the Council has created a number of advisory committees to raise issues of strategic concern and regularly report on the progress of projects. In addition, the Council has sought out advice from various representatives from public health and e-Health in order to set priorities for e-Health projects.

Setting priorities for 2005/06

The Council recognizes the importance of dealing with issues such as training, linkages, integration and information technology standards for each of the nine priority projects.

Training

The Council sees training for both current and future Public Health workers to deal with the new data collection and reporting environment created by iPHIS, the Immunization project and other Public Health communication initiatives as crucial to the successful implementation of the projects. As a consequence, the subject of training will be a key agenda item for the Council's fall meetings.

Stronger linkages and relationships within Ontario's health system

Linkages are crucial not only to update reportable disease and other databases, but to also enable the broader health sector to have access to this information. The Council has already begun exploring, for example, how to transfer data between iPHIS and other information systems. Furthermore, projects such as the Immunization Information System will require establishing closer working relationships between physicians and public health.

Integration of information

Access to lab information is a key factor in the success of public health. The electronic integration of lab information into public health systems is not only important, but has been confirmed as a priority for 2005/06.

Common standards for public health information

Without common IT architecture, standards and guidelines throughout the public health sector, providers can't communicate and use e-Health systems effectively. Since common information standards are basic to e-Health, the Council agreed to address this issue through its own priority project.

Public Health e-Health Council Celebrates the Launch of a New Era of Web-Enabled, Two-Way Communications Between Public Health and the Broader Health Care Sector.

Front, left to right: Dr. Sheela Basrur, Chief Medical Officer, MOHLTC and co-chair, Public Health e-Health Council; Dr. George Pasut, co-chair, Public Health e-Health Council; Back, left to right: Beata Pach, Chair, PublicHealthOntario.ca Portal Advisory Committee; Bill Mindell, Public Health e-Health Council; Bob Betts, Business Manager, SSHA; Ruta Valaitis, Public Health e-Health Council.

Beata Pach, Chair, PublicHealthOntario.ca Portal Advisory Committee cuts the cake. Left: Javier Castellanos, System Architect/ Xwave, SSHA.

Left to right: Beata Pach, Chair, PublicHealthOntario.ca Advisory Committee; Bob Betts, Business Manager, SSHA; Ruta Valaitis, Public Health e-Health Council; Philip Edwards, eHealthOntario.ca Advisory Committee.

Left to right: Ian Brunskill, Executive Lead, PHIIT Office and Chair, eHealthOntario.ca Advisory Committee; Beata Pach, Chair, PublicHealthOntario.ca Advisory Committee; Bill Mindell, Public Health e-Health Council; Bob Betts, Business Manager, SSHA; Dr. Sheela Basrur, Chief Medical Officer, MOHLTC and Co-chair, Public Health e-Health Council.

Correction: We apologize for the omission of the videoconferencing facility in the Public Health Division's Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Branch at 393 University Avenue in "Five Health Units Plug into Videoconferencing" published in the June 2005 issue.

Public Health Connects is published throughout the year for members of Ontario's public health and broader health communities by the Public Health Division of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.

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We welcome your story suggestions, tips on upcoming events, photo submissions and comments.

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