

Introduction to the Population Health Intervention Research Initiative for Canada

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Many of us who are working to improve health in Canada are faced with questions about what policy, program and/or intervention will work to improve the health of the population we are trying to reach. Research in population health over the past decade in Canada and elsewhere has confirmed the relationship between the determinants of health (for example, socio-economic status, education and housing) and the health of individuals and communities.¹ Questions around the timeliness, affordability and feasibility of population intervention research, issues key to decision-making, have generally not been satisfactorily addressed. Not only is evidence-based information often lacking but also, at this point in time, there is very little capacity in Canada, especially in terms of funding and skills, for conducting the kind of research needed to provide answers relevant to the Canadian context.

In order to begin addressing some of these gaps, a network of researchers and decision-makers from funding agencies, health-related non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and public health organizations came together to form the Population Health Intervention Research Initiative for Canada (PHIRIC). As a group, our mission is to build capacity in population health intervention research – its quantity, quality and use by policy-makers and practitioners. This special insert in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* has been created by PHIRIC to promote discussion and increase awareness about population health intervention research. For the purposes of PHIRIC and this insert, population health intervention research is defined as “the use of scientific methods to produce knowledge about policy and program interventions that operate within or outside of the health sector and have the potential to impact health at the population level”.²

The founding members of PHIRIC initially gathered out of mutual interest in population health intervention research. The following organizations are represented and make up the founding organizing committee of PHIRIC: the Canadian Institute for Health Information, Canadian Population Health Initiative; the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism and Diabetes; the CIHR Institute of Population and Public Health; the Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada; the Centre for Behavioural Research and Program Evaluation, University of Waterloo; and the Public Health Agency of Canada.

The initial activity of PHIRIC was to bring together others who might have similar interests. In September 2006, we convened a Population Health Intervention Research Workshop in Banff, Alberta. More than 40 invited participants representing researchers, funding agencies, health-related NGOs and public health organi-

zations reflected on and discussed ways in which to increase the capacity for Canadian population health intervention research. The workshop discussions solidified the interest in population health research and the need to move forward with the initiative and to create a broader network of many other researchers, funding agencies, policy- and decision-makers and practitioners. The summary of this workshop discussion is available online.²

PHIRIC has developed a strategic plan based on information obtained during the Banff workshop consultation and through internal networking. Issues of high priority include developing PHIRIC organizational capacity by identifying an organizational structure and secretariat for PHIRIC (the CIHR Institute of Population and Public Health agreed to assume this role for the first few years); increasing funding for population health intervention research; increasing the capacity of researchers and policy-makers respectively to conduct and use population health intervention research through training opportunities and programs; developing communication and networking capacity to increase the number of universities, researchers, practitioners, networks and other organizations within and outside the health sector that see the value in and that support increasing intervention research at the population level; and developing the field of population health research and evaluation through monitoring the quality and quantity of research, and increasing collaboration and synergy where possible. To date, several subcommittees of PHIRIC have been struck and are actively working on a communication plan, an evaluation and training framework, and peer review guidelines for intervention research.

In addition, members of the group have pursued a number of initiatives that complement the overall mission of PHIRIC. For example, the CIHR Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism and Diabetes, along with several partners, has launched a first-ever rapid response, open-ended Request for Applications for intervention research related to healthy living and chronic disease prevention. The Canadian Population Health Initiative has provided ongoing funding to three of its funded researchers to evaluate existing population health interventions. Several PHIRIC partners are working towards the development of an inventory of programs and policies that have the potential and opportunity to strengthen intervention and evaluation research capacity. The annual CIHR Summer Institute for graduate students (June 2007) focused on training our future researchers in population health intervention research.

Other organizations have already joined in our efforts, including the Institut national de santé publique du Québec, the

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Provincial Health Services Authority, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation and the Canadian Council on Learning. We anticipate that through our strong collaboration we will contribute to the creation of a broad constituency committed to developing and enhancing capacity for population health intervention research in Canada. It is an exciting time as we develop and seek innovative ways to understand what works and what does not work when it comes to improving the health and well-being of Canadians. We hope this special insert is just the beginning of ongoing dialogue and commitment to building capacity for population health intervention research in Canada. We look forward to your feedback and interest in moving PHIRIC forward.

REFERENCES

1. Wilkinson R, Marmot M (Eds.). *Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts*, 2nd ed. Copenhagen, Denmark: World Health Organization, 2003.
2. Institute of Population and Public Health. Population Health Intervention Research Initiative for Canada ("PHIRIC") Workshop Report. Available online at: <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/33515.html> (Accessed June 29, 2007).

Voici l'Initiative de recherche interventionnelle en santé des populations du Canada

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Pour beaucoup d'entre nous qui travaillons à améliorer la santé au Canada, il est parfois difficile de savoir quels sont les programmes, les politiques ou les interventions susceptibles d'améliorer la santé de nos populations cibles. La recherche en santé des populations menée depuis 10 ans au Canada et ailleurs confirme qu'il y a un lien entre les déterminants de la santé (le statut socioéconomique, le niveau de scolarité, le logement, etc.) et la santé des particuliers et des collectivités¹. Cependant, on n'a pas encore répondu de façon satisfaisante à des questions déterminantes pour la prise de décisions, des questions qui portent sur l'actualité, l'abordabilité et la faisabilité de la recherche interventionnelle axée sur la population. Non seulement manque-t-on souvent de données probantes, mais il existe encore très peu de capacités au Canada, surtout financières et humaines, pour mener le genre de recherche qui serait nécessaire pour fournir des réponses pertinentes dans le contexte canadien.

Pour commencer à combler certaines de ces lacunes, des chercheurs et des décideurs issus d'organismes de financement, d'organisations non gouvernementales (ONG) à vocation sanitaire et d'organismes de santé publique ont uni leurs forces pour former l'Initiative de recherche interventionnelle en santé des populations du Canada (IRISPC). Leur mission collective consiste à stimuler le développement des capacités de recherche interventionnelle en santé des populations – le volume, la qualité et l'utilisation de cette recherche par les décideurs et les praticiens. L'IRISPC a créé cet

encart spécial de la *Revue canadienne de santé publique* pour mieux faire connaître la recherche interventionnelle en santé des populations et pour qu'on en discute. À l'IRISPC et dans cet encart, on définit la recherche interventionnelle en santé des populations comme étant « l'utilisation de méthodes scientifiques pour produire des connaissances sur les interventions, sous forme de politiques et de programmes, qui existent dans le secteur de la santé ou à l'extérieur de celui-ci et qui pourraient avoir une incidence sur la santé au niveau des populations² ».

Les membres fondateurs de l'IRISPC se sont réunis parce qu'ils partageaient un même intérêt pour la recherche interventionnelle en santé des populations. Les organismes suivants y sont représentés et composent le comité organisateur fondateur : l'Initiative sur la santé de la population canadienne de l'Institut canadien d'information sur la santé; l'Institut de la nutrition, du métabolisme et du diabète des Instituts de recherche en santé du Canada (IRSC); l'Institut de la santé publique et des populations des IRSC; l'Alliance pour la prévention des maladies chroniques au Canada; le Centre de recherche sur le comportement et d'évaluation des programmes de l'Université de Waterloo; et l'Agence de la santé publique du Canada.

La première activité de l'IRISPC a été de rassembler d'autres acteurs ayant des intérêts semblables. En septembre 2006, on a organisé un atelier sur la recherche interventionnelle en santé des populations à Banff, en Alberta, où plus de 40 participants invités (des