

What is Public Health and why should we care about it?

Public Health is the department of government that organizes society to protect the health of its citizens – people and their communities. Its primary goal is to keep people healthy and prevent disease and injury and the pain, suffering, disability, and death that can result. Beyond ensuring clean and safe water, air, and food and shelter, it works to prevent disease and injury by activities as varied as immunization, restaurant inspections, and infant car seat and seatbelt legislation. It locks in these gains by promoting healthy lifestyles and developing healthy public policies. Public Health is concerned with protecting the health of entire populations – as small as local neighbourhoods and groups of people, and as large as an entire province, country or region of the world.

Canada's first Public Health workers were physicians, inspectors, and nurses. Today, Medical Officers of Health (MOH) are public advocates and leaders whose prime responsibility is to identify threats to health, design and deliver solutions, and to educate, direct, and inspire action on those solutions. Environmental Health Officers (Public Health Inspectors) identify and eliminate hazards to Albertans' health in the environment, communities, facilities, and workplaces. Public Health Nurses care for a variety of community groups and populations. They work with parents in well child clinics, with schools, and with vulnerable populations to provide advice and support to promote health, prevent disease and injury, and reduce harm.

Over time, many more professionals have been welcomed into the public health effort. These Public Health professionals engage groups and communities to help Albertans reach their health potential through developing people's personal skills, building communities supportive of health, and strengthening community action. Also, the collaboration and action of other government departments is required to enforce population-based healthy public policy and legislation according to the various Acts that govern society (e.g., Alberta Traffic Safety Act; Tobacco, Smoking and Vaping Control Act; Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Act). Together, many aspects of organized society help to keep all Albertans safe every day.

So why should we care about public health and the health of all Albertans?

We do not live in isolation; we talk to our neighbours, shop in local stores, and gather together in schools, churches and restaurants. As such, we expose ourselves to various hazards. For example, germs don't respect borders – not the bodies of individual people, nor the borders of communities and provinces. That is why the work of Public Health is so important. Programs such as surveillance, identification of vulnerable populations, public risk-prevention education, immunization clinics, contact tracing, and follow-up treatments are all part of infectious disease management at the population level.

Public Health does not work alone to protect Albertans. Each of us contributes to our personal health and to the health of our neighbours and communities by the choices we make. We follow the rules of the road. We cover our mouths and noses when we cough and sneeze. We place our waste in bins for collection and safe disposal. We donate to worthy causes and volunteer to support community activities. In these individual actions, we are each supporting the health and wellbeing of all Albertans.

Public Health action delivers powerful results. These results are often invisible – like the disease outbreak that is stopped in its track, or the environmental hazard that is averted. Moreover, results of Public Health efforts often take time to unveil good news. For example, Alberta is reporting a significant reduction in cervical cancer 15 years after HPV vaccines were routinely given to school-age girls and boys in the province.

Public Health has had significant positive effects on the prevention of disease, disability and death, with resultant improvements in Albertans' life expectancy and quality of life. While government is important, Public Health professionals rely on the contributions of Albertan families, communities, volunteer organizations, and responsible businesses that desire to see a world that is safer, healthier and fairer for all. It is the collaboration of concerned members of society – past, present and future – that permits Alberta's Public Health Department to achieve healthy Albertans in a healthy Alberta.

Investments in Public Health deliver robust returns in the health system. Consider measles, mumps and rubella – \$1 invested in giving children MMR vaccine saves \$16 in health care costs. Likewise, investments in workplace health and safety programs avoid illness, injury and fatalities on the job, and investments in mental health and addictions not only save health care costs but reduce lost productivity and the burden of personal, family and social costs. In these and other ways Public Health contributes to a robust Alberta economy.

Written by Dr. Ardene Robinson Vollman in collaboration with the Alberta Public Health Association.