

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Judith Maxwell

A Healthy Canada?

Once again, Canada is at the top of the list on the United Nations' Human Development Index. But at the same time, the Second Report on the Health of Canadians, issued by Canada's Ministers of Health, is reporting "distressing trends in the psychological well-being of Canada's youth." And research from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth has found that about 70 percent of the children aged 6 to 11 who experience developmental delays or behavioral disorders are from middle-class or well-off families.

What does this say about the quality of life in Canada these days? On a combined measure of income per capita, education, and life expectancy, we are at the top of the ranks. But why are our children and youth not thriving if Canada is number one?

The Canadian Policy Research Networks has some possible explanations. The first one relates to the pressures on Canadian families, and the second relates to a new understanding of the sources of health. Both children and health are at the top of the social investment list, as governments begin to plan for the post-deficit era.

Family Pressures

Compared to the 1970s and 1980s, Canadian families are working harder, commuting longer, and are more isolated from extended family. Far too many parents with young children say they are highly stressed, fighting both time and financial deficits. Both parents must work to support the family, but they can not find the kinds of supports they need to help them balance family and work responsibilities – in the workplace, in their neighborhoods or within the extended family. To maintain their standard of living, they sometimes must sacrifice their quality of life and particularly the quality of the time and attention they can give to their children. Or, to give their best to their children, they must make major sacrifices of current and future income, as well as time with their partners and their communities. Eventually, we all can suffer from the effects of these time crunches, as children do not get the start they need, the risk of divorce rises, and commitments of time and energy by engaged citizens fall.

Children Nested in Multiple Environments



Research evidence on child outcomes demonstrates clear consequences for young children that are associated with parents' ability to provide for their families, financially and through sound parenting practices. The life circumstances of children depend on the life circumstances of their parents, which, in turn, depend upon the environments they experience in communities and workplaces. Therefore, in order to fully provide for their children, parents need employers and communities to support family life. In addition, they need all orders of government to make investments in children and parents. In this way, the nests in which children live will, together, provide the "enabling conditions" needed to ensure child well-being and healthy development.

Because public policies have primarily addressed fiscal problems over the past 20 years, governments have deliberately shifted their focus from supporting all families to supporting poor families. This was a rational choice in many ways because children in poor families are known to be at higher risk than those with more income.

But we now know, thanks to a wealth of studies such as those of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research and the Survey of Children and Youth, adequate income is no guarantee of a healthy childhood. Children also need effective parenting and supportive community environments. These requirements translate into a need for supports for parents to be at home with very young children (maternity and parental leave) and high quality child care options for all children. They also demand recreational, health, well-baby and parenting aids that are accessible to all families.

Because families are more and more stretched by the working commitments demanded by the Canadian economic life today, public policymakers, employers, and community leaders must take account of the needs of all families – low-income, middle-class and well-to-do – so that parents can do their best for their children. If we fail to do this, then more and more children from all types of families will not have the childhood they deserve, instead experiencing depression, failing at school, thinking suicidal thoughts, or engaging in bullying or other violent behaviors. This in turn will create a future burden on the health care, correctional and social welfare systems. This is why CPRN's Family Network undertook an ambitious research program on the Best Policy Mix for Canada's Children in 1996. It is coming to completion in the Fall of 1999 with two publications: a major study entitled *What Is the Best Policy Mix for Canada's Young Children?* and a shorter *REFLEXION, A Policy Blueprint for Canada's Children*. The Blueprint lays out a long-term societal strategy for federal and provincial governments, employers, and community organizations to look after the next generation.



A New Conception of Health

The question of why some people are healthy and others are not is one that plagues health professionals. We know that smoking leads to cancer. But we cannot explain why it is that Jenny who smoked all her life is a healthy 70-year-old, but Joe, who has never smoked, is suffering from lung cancer at 63. Healthy lifestyles are important and can improve the quality of life, but they are no guarantee.

In-depth studies of large populations show that there is a high probability that people with more income will live longer and healthier lives than people with lower incomes. While diet and quality of housing and lifestyle explain some of this, a large part of the difference remains unexplained.

The Health Network has been untangling this puzzle for the past year and has come up with a hypothesis, which is supported by many of the major population studies. The hypothesis is the following:

a major contributor to health is a robust interaction between an individual and his or her social context.

For example, the Whitehall study of the British public service (by M. G. Marmot) has suggested that one important reason why some public servants are healthier than others is that they have more control over their work. Our hypothesis would suggest that people who can interact with their work to influence its pace and the way priorities are set are likely to be healthier than those lower down the job hierarchy who can not.

This discovery, of course, in no way reduces the importance of a robust health care system to look after people who get sick. Nor should we abandon public health programs such as sanitation and immunization, or the health promotion activities that encourage healthy behaviours and healthy communities.

What it does mean is that we need to look more carefully at how people relate to their work in the new economy – new projects underway in the Work Network on the quality of work and changing employment relationships are beginning to address these issues and we will have more to report in the next year or two.

To go back to families for a moment, this focus on the relationship between individuals and their environments helps us to understand the responsibilities of parents. If both parents (and lone parents) are expected to work outside the home, they need support as well as options. They need to be able to make real, not forced, choices about child care, as well as options for spending time with their children. They also need access to good parenting and wellness aids through quality community resource centres.

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Looking Forward

The Human Development Index looks backward. It tells us that today's adults have had access to good education and they have found jobs that enable them to earn a decent living. The reports on the health of our children are alarm bells about the future. They tell us that in the long struggle to get our economic house in order, we have missed out on some key investments in the time and resources that parents desperately need to give their children a happy childhood and a good start on life.

This sense that we have missed out on key investments may explain why so many Canadians are beginning to put their energy into tracking the health of their communities – Vital Signs in Toronto, Sustainable Calgary, and Edmonton 2005, to name just three. These are citizen-led efforts. They are also holistic – tracking the economy, but also environment, health, and social indicators.

When citizens try to identify priorities, as one group in Alberta did, they focus on “meeting basic needs, hope, self-determination, health and well-being, security, and community.” That is what Canadians want for the 21st century – for themselves and their children.


Judith Maxwell
October 1999

MOMENTUM

For the Canadian Policy Research Networks, 1998-99 was the beginning of a new era. It was a year when our approach to policy research was affirmed, when the federal government made a strategic investment to sustain our operations into the future, and when a number of major programs helped to inform policy development in Canada. There is a great sense of momentum in this organization.

Generating New Ideas for Social and Economic Policy

Generating and sharing new ideas is at the heart of the work we do at the Canadian Policy Research Networks. We work in research networks – on family, health and work issues. We chose to use networks because they are efficient, they enable us to bring in the best talent wherever it is, and they create closer links to our stakeholders – researchers and policy advisors, but also citizens, communities, employers, foundations, and public institutions. Networks also allow us to share our ideas with the people who put them into practice.

Dynamism and Growth

With the appointment of two new network directors, CPRN now has a formal research presence in Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, and Edmonton. We are publishing more than ever, and are exploring new ways to integrate the ideas emerging from our three networks – family, health and work.

Our mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians. Our goal is to help make Canada a more just, prosperous and caring society.

– Excerpt from the CPRN Mission Statement

An Independent Report Card

At the end of four years of operation, the Board of Directors commissioned an independent evaluation of the organization. The External Review Committee was chaired by Robert D. Brown, Clifford Clark Visiting Economist at the federal Department of Finance and Past Chair of Price Waterhouse. The members included Susan A. McDaniel, Professor of Sociology at the University of Alberta and George Thomson, Special Advisor to the federal Minister of Justice. The Committee also benefited from the advice of the late John Tait, former Deputy Minister of Justice. The Committee and its consultant, Arthur Stewart, conducted extensive interviews with stakeholders on CPRN's performance. The conclusion was that:

. . . CPRN has succeeded in its core mission of influencing and helping a diverse array of people and organizations within the public policy community. . . CPRN has advanced policy thinking in Canada in a consensual and credible manner. . . Overall, CPRN has made a significant, positive contribution to the examination of social and economic issues in Canada.

The Brown Committee acknowledged, however, that our research processes mean that “CPRN must nurture collaborative relationships with an extraordinary number of individuals and organizations.” That, quite simply, is a challenge for a small organization. Fortunately, the Brown Committee's recommendations included a number of measures that will help us maintain and develop our networks and manage the flow of information and communication.

A Capital Investment for a Sustainable Future

With the positive results of the external review showing that policymakers at all levels appreciate the quality of CPRN's work, the federal government made a one-time capital grant of \$9 million to the organization to replace the core funding that had been provided by six federal agencies for the first five years of operations.

This grant will enable CPRN to manage financial risks and make strategic investments. Our plan is to use the capital when needed but also to make it grow through new contributions. To minimize the claims on the capital, we will ensure that project funding covers our direct and indirect costs.

What would happen if there were no CPRN in Canada? We would have to invent it. It performs well a necessary function that is not well performed by many.

– Academic researcher quoted by the External Review Committee

Based on the recommendations of the Brown Committee, and on direct input at a staff retreat, we agreed on a strategic plan for the next two years to get CPRN ready for the 21st century. The first withdrawals from the capital grant will be used to implement the plan. Our challenge for a sustainable CPRN is to:

- build strong, long-term connections with our stakeholders,
- nurture the talents and skills of our people wherever they are based, and
- invest in the technology and other tools our people need to be creative and effective.

CPRN will continue to be entrepreneurial, ensuring that its ideas are valuable to all sectors of Canadian society and that it merits continued investment by all our sponsors and project funders. (See the list on page 15.)

Change and Renewal for Our Board of Directors

The Board of Directors has also had a year of change and renewal. Arthur Kroeger, who had served as unofficial Lead Director since CPRN was incorporated in December 1994, was appointed Chair. During the past year, four members joined the Board – Michèle Thibodeau-DeGuire, Avrim Lazar, Gregory Marchildon, and Alan Nymark. We are indebted to four departing members, Claire Morris, Michèle Jean, Jim Lahey, and Jacques Ménard, and are pleased that the last three were able to continue their connection with the Board as Associate Members.

The Board oversees CPRN's strategic direction, including stewardship of the funds entrusted to us, risk management, communications policy, and the appointment and assessment of the performance of the President. The Board believes that governance is a living process and that there is, therefore, a need to avoid rigid structures. CPRN must be flexible enough to respond to changing circumstances at all times.

The Board's mandate and objectives have been renewed and two new committees have been established to strengthen the Board's oversight of our activities: Audit and Finance, and Governance and Nominating.

Listening to Others Gives CPRN a Distinctive Voice

While it is important for CPRN to be heard among policymakers, it is also vitally important that we hear from diverse groups of Canadians. It is this emphasis on incorporating Canadians' views and values into our work that gives our voice distinction. When we speak to policymakers and opinion leaders in all sectors of the economy, we are able to say, first, that the ideas have been rigorously tested with experts from the public, private, and voluntary sectors who participate in the research process, and second, that the ideas incorporate the views of Canadians themselves.

To bring experts into the research process in 1998-99, we held five roundtable discussions, five advisory committee meetings, and four workshops, involving a total of 250 individuals from outside our organization. For example, in June 1999, the Work Network hosted a small roundtable with Alberta-based employers to talk about their experiences with the changing nature of the work relationship with their employees, while the Family Network convened a national roundtable in Ottawa to discuss the draft synthesis of the research results from the Best Policy Mix for Canada's Children.

To reach out to a wider audience of opinion leaders, CPRN contributed to policy discussions in St. John's, Moncton, Montreal, Kingston, Ottawa, Toronto, Regina, Edmonton, Vancouver, Victoria and other locations. We also contributed to the work of federal-provincial committees, House of Commons committees, the federal Policy Research Conference, a Commonwealth Foundation project, and Voluntary Sector Discussion Tables with the federal government. We also provided research support for the Senate Social Affairs Committee in its work on social cohesion.

To connect with citizens more generally, CPRN brings Canadians together in small groups to discuss important issues through a project called *The Society We Want*. After working on a series of social policy issues for several years with the help of voluntary organizations across the country, CPRN created a new Dialogue Kit and two new issue guides in 1999. These guides are giving citizens the opportunity to deliberate on the conflicting goals of the health care system and the changing nature of work. The work guide, for example, helps Canadians to reflect on what they need in three areas – work and health, quality of work, and their sense of the relationship between paid work and economic security.

The Society We Want Staff:

Rhonda Ferderber, Miriam Wyman and Valerie Taraska

Knowledge Transfer Is a Priority

Our Network Directors are committed to effective knowledge transfer to users. As Graham Lowe once pointed out, too much knowledge “is buried deep in academic journals that aren't all that accessible.” He and the other Directors work at synthesizing knowledge so that it is easier to apply in the current context. The Brown Report recommendations stressed the need for more sustained interaction with our stakeholders, so this has been a priority in 1998-99 and will continue to be a key objective.

The communication strategy is beginning to show impressive results: 109 newspaper articles mentioned our research between June 1998 and August 1999, and 43 radio and television interviews were conducted with our spokespersons. An early identification of the messages and a closer tie with researchers as the papers are distilled into key findings have helped to define the stories we want to tell our target audiences. Personal briefings with targeted media have helped turn these stories into headlines. Regular commentaries from the President and Network Directors bring a new light to the public debate.

Our communications products are important elements of our knowledge transfer. Interested stakeholders can simply log on to our Internet site and register to receive regular updates on our activities through *e-network*, our weekly on-line newsletter. With close to 1,000 subscribers, *e-network* has grown tenfold since the service was inaugurated in February 1999.

Subscribers can receive the quarterly publication, *Network News*, which is now a vehicle for both the dissemination of research and the nurturing of our relationships with stakeholders.

Traffic on our Web site, www.cprn.org, multiplied tenfold in the last year. The site is updated regularly to ensure that visitors can find the most recent reports and presentations.

In addition, at least two of our research studies are to be published by Oxford University Press of Canada, which will significantly increase their accessibility for the academic market of students and professors interested in public policy analysis.