



Health
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Science Advisory Board

Annual Report to the Minister of Health 1999-2000

Canada 

Introduction

The Science Advisory Board (SAB) was established in 1997 to advise the Minister of Health on the future direction of Health Canada's health protection program.

Over the last three years, SAB has functioned as an arms-length body, a blue-ribbon panel of scientists, health professionals, and consumer advocates, who, upon review, have provided advice on all Health Canada's health protection programs from food safety to environmental health risks, and on its surveillance and regulatory capacity.

Our work has focussed on strengthening Health Canada's role in protecting the health and safety of Canadians, while underlining the need for initiatives that increase public awareness and confidence, and on giving the public a voice.

Since my appointment as Chair of SAB in December 1997, it has been my distinct pleasure to work with such a distinguished panel. I would like to take the opportunity to provide you with our second annual report, which briefly highlights the work of the Board for 1999-2000.

Excellence in Science

Since its inception, SAB has striven to promote the integrity, quality, comprehensiveness, and leadership of science in Health Canada's Health Protection Branch (HPB). Much of this year's work has focussed on areas that are of concern to Canadians.

! One of the recommendations the Board has made to Health Canada is the implementation of an External Peer Review process, a pilot project in partnership with the Medical Research Council (MRC). Regular external assessment of scientific activities within HPB will help strengthen the credibility, independence, and currency of science performance. HPB has taken on the task and is working with the MRC to implement a pilot Peer Review project within the Branch.

! The Board has also done much work to endorse a close, collaborative relationship between Health Canada and the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR). A strong collaboration will not only facilitate exchanges of expertise, research personnel, and facilities, but will also align research with the health needs of Canadians, as well as provide innovation

and scientific excellence. Specifically, the Board has recommended that representatives of Health Canada's research community participate in relevant CIHR Advisory Board meetings, and in strategic initiatives planning. The exchange of research personnel between HPB and CIHR, the sharing of expertise, for example

peer review, knowledge management, and the use of the Winnipeg and Guelph facilities has also been encouraged.

- ! The future appointment of a Chief Scientist at Health Canada, one of SAB's primary recommendations, shows the tangible commitment that Health Canada has in implementing the Board's recommendations. The Chief Scientist, once appointed, will carefully review and act on the advice and views of HPB scientists on the pertinent issues within the programs' mandates.

- ! The Board has also recommended the application of directions from the Report on Science Advice for Government Effectiveness, written by the Federal Council of Science and Technology. This report provides guidance on how to ensure that government decisions are based on sound scientific advice. Specifically, the report presents a set of six key science advice principles, which can improve science-based decision-making, and provides the government with guidelines to facilitate the adoption of the principles, how to implement them and to monitor their effectiveness.

Transition

The Board was created to provide ministerial advice during HPB's "Transition Initiative". For this reason, the Transition Initiative's five core elements have been, to some extent, the basis of our work. Legislative renewal, program development, decision-making, surveillance, and the science platform, have all been areas where SAB has provided analysis, critique, and support.

- ! **Surveillance:** The transition initiative has been tasked to strengthen and to expand HPB's overall surveillance capacity, and to support an integrated health surveillance network for public health information from the local to the global level. To that end, SAB has endorsed the direction already taken by the Transition Surveillance team. Subsequently, the proposal for a Network for Surveillance in Canada (NHSC) was formally endorsed at the Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Council of Deputy Ministers of Health June 18 meeting in Charlottetown. The Health Surveillance Working Group, representing members of the NHSC, has undertaken to complete

business and strategic plans that will guide the process of building the network.

- ! Program Development: Transition Program development entails the establishment of integrated and coordinated health programs. The Board has contributed analysis and direction during the development of several new health programs including HPB's Safe and Nutritious Food Program, Environmental Health Strategy, and Chronic Disease Control Programme.

- ! Science Platform: HPB has a tradition of strong scientific leadership. It is the task of the Transition Science's core team to review how science contributes to regulatory and public health functions, and how to strengthen the integration of science activities into health protection policy, risk management, and the decision-making process to create a solid, scientific base on which to build. Recommendations, such as the External Peer Review, and the collaborative relationship between Health Canada and the CIHR show the Board's contribution to strengthening that foundation.

- ! Decision-making: It has been a mandate of the Board to recommend ways of communicating to Canadians how decisions are made in HPB and how, for example, potential conflict of interest is balanced with the primary responsibility to health protection. Within the last two years, SAB has strived to secure effective communication tools for explaining risk decision-making to Canadians, a function which is being incorporated into the revised Risk Management Framework.

- ! Legislative renewal: As the Transition Team updates and renews the legislative framework for health protection, it has been the role of the Board to sustain the message of accountability and transparency at all levels, in support of the health of Canadians. The Transition Team has recently prepared a detailed proposal for new health protection legislation, which drew on the results of national consultations and discussions with various stakeholders, including SAB. The proposal will form part of a discussion paper, which will serve as the basis for a second round of public consultations.

Communicating with Canadians

One of the most pervasive messages that we have put forth as a Board throughout our tenure is the need for HPB to demonstrate clearly and consistently its commitment to the health protection of Canadians, through communication, integrity, and transparency.

Public Involvement, and the Transition initiative for public involvement, including the Office of Consumer Affairs and Public Involvement that was recently created, have been a major focus for SAB. Public involvement does not only entail public consultation; it describes a broad continuum of activities between the government and the public, which includes joint decision-making, advisory committees, formal consultations and dialogue, and public and government education.

Issues for the Millennium

As the membership of the Board changes, and the new millennium dawns, challenging new issues will be addressed by SAB, concerns that are important to Canadians, such as genetically modified foods, natural health products and their regulation, and biotechnology. However, for the Board, certain themes will remain at the forefront. It will be the quality, integrity, comprehensiveness, currency of science, and the commitment of Health Canada to its mandate of health protection, that will remain the underlying basis of SAB's analysis, critique, and support.