

## **The CCSA National Working Group on Addictions Policy: Historical Overview**

The CCSA National Working Group on Addictions Policy has been in operation since 1991. Consisting of addictions policy experts from across Canada, the group has no official status. Indeed, its members pay their own expenses to attend bi-annual meetings and help prepare documents on behalf of the working group.

In many ways, the working group grew out of the now-defunct Federal-Provincial Advisory Committee on Alcohol and Other Drugs. This was a formal committee consisting of high-level representatives of each province and territory, as well as representatives of the federal government. For example, the representative from Ontario was traditionally the President of the Addiction Research Foundation (ARF), and Alberta was represented by the President of the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (ADAC). The group met twice a year from the late 1970s until 1992, with travel expenses covered by the Ministry of Health.

The ostensible *raison d'être* of the Federal-Provincial Advisory Committee on Alcohol and Other Drugs was to provide policy advice to the Council of Deputy Health Ministers. Members of the committee participated enthusiastically and frequently voiced appreciation for the opportunity to meet and discuss issues of mutual concern with colleagues from across the country. However, the committee was not well structured to generate consensus documents to pass on to the ministerial level. There was no secretariat attached to the Committee to conduct the required research and prepare drafts of consensus documents for the Committee's consideration. Thus, although the Committee did serve useful purposes in the sharing of information and in helping to coordinate addictions policy across Canada, it failed to provide the Council of Deputy Health Ministers with any policy advice at all during its long existence.

At approximately the same time, the newly-created Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) was developing its policy and research function under the leadership of Eric Single. Dr Single was invited to attend a meeting of the Federal-Provincial Advisory Committee on Alcohol and Other Drugs in the fall of 1991 in order to discuss the possibility for the new CCSA Policy and Research Unit to act as secretariat for the Committee and take on the task of preparing summaries of research on issues of concern and draft policy discussion documents on behalf of the Committee. Given the very limited resources of the CCSA Policy and Research Unit, Dr Single was concerned that the new Unit might not be able to fulfill a commitment to the act as secretariat for the Committee and still carry out its other functions. He therefore proposed instead that the CCSA form its own working group on addictions issues that would strongly take into consideration the needs of the Federal-Provincial Advisory Committee on Alcohol and Other Drugs when setting its policy agenda.

Limited in number and composed of policy experts familiar with research on addictions issues, the proposed CCSA working group was designed to produce the kind of policy documents that were required by the Committee. It also had the distinct advantage of being able to enlist the participation from Quebec, which was not participating in Federal-Provincial committees at that time. There was some skepticism, however, from representatives of smaller provinces that may not have representation on the smaller working group. It was agreed that the next meeting of the Federal-Provincial Advisory Committee on Alcohol and Other Drugs would include an extra day to discuss a set of proposed guidelines for the development of addictions policy, which Dr Single would

prepare. The smaller provinces indicated that they would agree to the CCSA working group concept if consensus could be reached on a set of principles to guide the development of policy.

In May of 1992, the underlying principles of policy development were discussed in a special day-long meeting of the Federal-Provincial Advisory Committee on Alcohol and Other Drugs held in St John's, Newfoundland and attended by representatives from Quebec. There was a general consensus on the principles of policy development and agreement that the CCSA should create a working group of experts which would have no formal connection to the Committee but would be available to help the Committee carry out its work. Unfortunately, just when these steps were being taken to remedy the problems with its ability to prepare policy documents, the federal government disbanded the Committee.

Ironically, the demise of the Federal-Provincial Advisory Committee on Alcohol and Other Drugs made the creation of a CCSA working group on policy even more imperative. The loss of the Committee meant that there was suddenly little or no opportunity for provincial agencies to discuss and/or coordinate addictions policy across Canada. The CCSA therefore went ahead despite the demise of the Federal Provincial Committee and created the CCSA Working Group on Addictions Policy in 1992. The working group became an important mechanism (but not the only mechanism) for the development of CCSA policy. Its first policy discussion document, "Guiding Principles for Substance Abuse Policy," was produced in 1992 and is available on the CCSA website ([www.ccsa.ca](http://www.ccsa.ca)).

The group was chaired by Dr Single until his retirement in 2002. It is currently chaired by John Borody, CEO of the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba. Working Group members are drawn from the network of organizations that constitute the Canadian Executive Council on Addictions (CECA) – Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA), Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC), Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM), Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH) and from the provinces of British Columbia, Quebec and Nova Scotia. In addition, a senior policy official from Health Canada is a member. The group continues to operate on a volunteer basis, with members paying their own expenses and contributing generously of their time and expertise. The policy papers produced by the working group are presented to the CCSA Board of Directors for approval. When possible, the papers are also submitted for publication in peer-reviewed journals in order to ensure the quality of the work and enhance their credibility.