

A STATUS REPORT

THE SCIENCE ADVISORY BOARD

HEALTH CANADA

FEBRUARY 1998 - MARCH 1999

Letter from the Chair

In 1997, the Minister of Health, Allan Rock, established the Science Advisory Board (SAB) for Health Canada. The SAB joined other similar advisory bodies which have been set up following the federal government's 1996 science and technology review and recommendations.

In October 1997, I was asked to be the Chair of the SAB and was delighted to accept. My colleagues (a list is attached) are all highly distinguished scientists, health professionals and consumer advocates dedicated to the health sciences and to the Canadians these resources serve. It is a great honor to have worked with them over these last eighteen months, and together we have taken significant steps toward meeting our mandate.

The Board's mandate is a broad one: it is to provide independent advice to the Minister on how to achieve and assure the best science at the Health Protection Branch; and on how the Health Protection Branch can gain and keep the confidence of Canadians in its work.

As a Board, we are convinced of the essential role HPB plays in promoting and advancing all Canadians' health, and in preventing and managing any hazards to our health as individuals and as part of the wider community in Canada and globally.

Through its "Transition initiative", the Branch is working toward a broad-based sustainable renewal in all areas. The Board has full trust in the Branch and its staff, and we encourage all of them to continue in this visionary task.

For our part, we have met with the Minister twice since the Board was established, and with staff on a number of occasions. We have had eight Board meetings to date and this first status report reflects the major issues we addressed, our progress and our plans for 1999-2000. We have also published our reports: these and other documents on HPB's activities are available on our website at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpb/science/index.html>.

On behalf of the Board, I trust you will find this report useful and informative. The Health Protection Branch has initiated and is actively involved in initiatives which will help Canadians to meet the many health challenges of the new millennium. The Science Advisory Board will continue to advise and recommend on ways to meet those challenges.

Roberta Bondar, OC, O.Ont., MD, PhD, FRCP(C)

Report: September 1997 - March 1999

Background

This document outlines briefly the work of the Science Advisory Board, Health Protection Branch, Health Canada, since its establishment in December 1997.

The Science Advisory Board provides independent advice to the Minister of Health on how best to position the scientific, technical and policy aspects of HPB programs now and in the future. The Board has no decision-making authority over programs or regulatory functions, nor is it responsible for the implementation of its advice. The Board performs special assignments as requested by the Minister, and it has endorsed its terms of reference (attached). The Board operates as an arm's length advisory body to the Minister of Health Canada. Meeting reports reflect the Board's discussions and record its major recommendations and conclusions. The reports give a broad overview of the nature and depth of discussions and issues raised.

Achievements

At its first meeting in February 1998, the Board developed its procedures and agreed on a workplan to meet its terms of reference and its mandate. During its March 1998 meeting, the Board was briefed in depth about the Branch and its programs. Members visited HPB laboratories in the National Capital Region and took the opportunity to hear directly from a number of scientific staff in the laboratory setting, in a panel presentation, and through written submissions. Over the Spring months and early Summer of 1998, Members also participated in consultation sessions with staff and with external stakeholders.

Many issues which the Board addressed are currently key challenges facing the Branch and have been the subject of significant public debate. The Board has, in its deliberations, addressed both the Branch's approach to these challenges and the fundamental roles of its programs. A major example is the "Transition" initiative which aims to strengthen Health Protection Branch and its partners so they can better manage risks to the health of Canadians. Transition and renewal are key themes in our work to date, recognition of the need for legislative modernization and of the dramatic and world-wide shifts in health science.

The board has been briefed in depth on the Transition initiative, which will take HPB into the next century and will provide the architecture for its work. The five elements of Transition, which touch on all aspects of HPB's work, are as follows:

- program development -- the development of integrated and coordinated health programs, for example, the Safe and Nutritious Food Program;

- surveillance – to develop with partners a nationally integrated surveillance framework;
- risk management – to develop a framework that clearly outlines how the Branch will manage risks for the health protection of Canadians;
- science platform -- strengthening the quality and management of science, including systematic peer review, priority setting and resource allocation, and innovative collaboration with peers and colleagues at home and abroad;
- legislative renewal -- updating and integrating federal health protection legislation.

The Board has followed closely the developments in each of these areas, and has advised and seen action in a number of them to date. For example, systematic peer review of HPB scientists' work was recommended and is being put in place. Consultation with interested parties in HPB's drug review process was initiated, as was internal consultation with HPB scientists. A new office of consumer affairs and public information was proposed in part as a result of the SAB's insistence on more and better communication and dissemination of HPB information to all stakeholders. The Board also recommended on the appointment of a Chief Scientist.

During 1998, the Board forwarded two letters of recommendation to the Minister, in addition to its six reports. One addressed the fate of the non-human primate laboratory and the second, the development of HPB's Safe and Nutritious Food Program. The content of these letters is included in the meeting reports of May and November 1998 respectively.

The Board has had the opportunity to visit the new Laboratory Centre for Disease Control in Winnipeg, the first of only a few such state-of-the art labs in the world to address human and animal health. The Board identified the facility as an opportunity to conduct leading edge collaborative science and as a prototype for the way science is conducted in the HPB of the future.

The Board also followed closely the review of the regulatory framework for natural health products and has provided advice on proposed directions.

The quality of HPB science - which must aim for the highest standard - was also part of SAB's review, closely integrated with its discussions of other "science platform" issues like peer review and the role of a Chief Scientist. The Board recognized that adequate and sufficient resources were essential to assuring the best quality of work and people, and the February 1999 budget which emphasized health care has added significant funds to HPB's budget. The Board welcomes this recognition of HPB's front-line work in protecting the health of Canadians, and was briefed at its March 1999 meeting on the allocation of the new monies. The Board will continue to follow the Branch's

developments at future meetings in 1999.

Plans for 1999

At its January 1999 meeting, the Board discussed its priorities for the year and strategies to achieve them. Members concluded that two broad themes should have priority and be the focus of their deliberations for 1999:

- ▶ The integrity, quality, comprehensiveness and leadership of science at the Health Protection Branch;
- ▶ The commitment of Health Canada to its mandate of health protection, in particular, to provide analysis, critique and support for the on-going Transition efforts of the Health Protection Branch in five core areas of legislative renewal, program development, risk management framework, surveillance and science platform.

Members advised that Health Canada must demonstrate clearly and consistently its commitment to the health protection of Canadians, through communications with Canadians demonstrating its commitment, integrity and transparency; information on how risks are analyzed and managed; and information on how potential conflict of interest is balanced with the primary responsibility to health protection. As Members continue to follow closely the Transition project, they will advise on its key milestones.

Conclusion

Since the first meeting in February 1998, the Board has been impressed by the complexity of the task of the renewal and Transition undertaken by HPB, and by the determination of the Minister and the Department to assure the successful completion of this multifaceted exercise.

List of Appendices:

A - Membership of the Science Advisory Board

B - Terms of Reference

For more information, contact:

Hélène Quesnel, Secretariat to the Science Advisory Board
Room 1174, Health Protection Building, Address Locator: 0701B1
Tunney's Pasture, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A OL2