

## Reduce Health Inequities

---

### The Issue:

The social, economic, and environmental factors which influence our health, and contribute to health inequities, are known as the determinants of health. Health inequities - the differences in health status between the most and least healthy - are closely linked to socioeconomic status.

*"The rate of premature death among all Canadians could be reduced by 20% if all Canadians were as healthy as the richest 20% of Canadians" (Dr. David Butler-Jones, Chief Public Health Officer, Public Health Agency of Canada, in the Report on the State of Public Health in Canada, 2008).*

People experiencing poor social and economic conditions are more exposed to health hazards in the physical environment, experience more psychosocial stress, suffer more material deprivation (inadequate nutrition, poor housing) and have fewer opportunities to adopt healthy behaviours such as participating in regular physical exercise, maintaining a healthy diet, and refraining from smoking (WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2007).

*In a public opinion poll conducted by Angus Reid Strategies for the BC Healthy Living Alliance in May 2008, 25% of respondents named 'healthy food being too expensive' as the single biggest barrier to making healthy choices about food.*

Low income and poverty, which are often linked with low education and employment levels, are significant social determinants of health. And, on this measure, British Columbians should be concerned. The rate of poverty in British Columbia has been higher than the Canadian average since the mid-1990s (BC Progress Board, 2006). And, BC has the highest rate of childhood poverty in the country (Statistics Canada Income Trends in Canada, 2006).

Health inequities are contributing to the burden of cancer, and other chronic diseases, and are straining the health care system. Timing is critical and it has grown essential to consider and coordinate measures that can reduce health inequities and support a more sustainable health care system.

### ACTIONS REQUIRED:

In order to reduce the burden of cancer, and other chronic diseases, and ensure our health care system is sustainable, the Canadian Cancer Society is calling on all political parties to make a commitment to:

- a) **Use a whole-of-government approach to reduce barriers between government Ministries and ensure coordinated and integrated healthy public policy**
  - A whole-of-government approach means all ministries work together towards a common goal and government-wide targets are developed for improving the health status of the entire population of British Columbia.
  - An integrated approach to policy-making is applied that will deal with the complex problem of health inequities from various angles.

- ActNow BC, British Columbia's healthy living initiative, uses a whole-of-government approach. ActNow BC makes use of an interministerial committee, and supports information sharing and cross-ministry planning and priority setting.
- This whole-of-government approach has been recognized by the World Health Organization and other national groups as an effective model for health promotion.
- The Seniors' Healthy Living Framework, announced by the Minister of Healthy Living and Sport on September 12, 2008, was developed collaboratively by 13 ministries, and is another good example of an initiative that works across the BC government, in partnership with key stakeholders.

**b) Continue to fund, expand, and implement ActNow BC beyond 2010**

- ActNow BC was created to contribute to the government's goal of being the healthiest population to ever host an Olympic Games. It should continue to be implemented beyond 2010, and continue to contribute to a more sustainable health care system.
- ActNow BC should be expanded in its capacity to coordinate primary prevention initiatives which reduce the burden of chronic diseases like cancer.
- To improve ActNow BC, we would like to see the initiative target health inequities, in order to begin to alleviate the 'causes' of unhealthy habits and lifestyle choices.

**c) Create a strategy where all government ministries have a specific plan in place to support the reduction of health inequities**

- The World Health Organization states that countries must make addressing the 'structural' stratification of their societies a priority. This means reducing the gap between those at the highest and lowest income levels through actions that will eradicate poverty and increase opportunities for employment, education, and early child development.
- Immediate and strategic interventions are needed in policy and practice. Every ministry needs to look at its programs and policies and identify the role it can play in order to meet government-wide targets for improving the health status among the entire population of British Columbia.
- All government ministries should receive incremental government funding to create and implement action plans to achieve these health inequity targets.

*79% of British Columbians support a provincial action plan with targets and timelines to improve the health of disadvantaged citizens (Angus Reid Strategies: Attitudes and Barriers to Healthy Living, 2008 (BCHLA Public Opinion Research)).*

