

## Will SARS crisis give Canada its own CDC?

At least one positive development might emerge from Canada's recent outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS): the creation of a national disease control centre similar to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the US.

Dr. David Naylor, the head of a national panel examining the handling of Canada's SARS outbreak, says the panel will consider all "reasonable options to enhance and coordinate surveillance and response capacity." One idea being floated (*CMAJ* 2003;168[11]:1381) is a national centre to fight outbreaks; British Columbia already has its own centre, and Ontario may create one.

"It's too soon to say what the recommended options may be, [and] the creation of an 'Ontario CDC' would ultimately be a matter for Ontario to decide," Naylor, dean of medicine at the University of Toronto, told *CMAJ*. "That said, since viruses don't respect national or provincial borders I hope the panel will take a pan-Canadian perspective, liaising closely with and respecting the relevant jurisdictions, but not slavishly adhering to a federal mandate."

Naylor is well placed to judge SARS' impact because of his close relationship with hospitals in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). He says they will be able to bounce back, but the outbreak has created some larger questions. "We can eliminate the backlog in services in the GTA if hospitals run full tilt over the summer, rather than going into summer slowdown mode. However, this outbreak raises difficult questions about surge capacity not just in public health, but in the clinical sphere."

Naylor, who was named chair of the panel Apr. 29, says its study will include SARS' ethical, legal, social and economic implications. "Thousands of women and men rose to the occasion to contain SARS, but we have to ask if our systems were optimal to support them. If not, how can we improve them next time?"

The 10 panel members include Dr. David Butler-Jones, past president of the Canadian Public Health Association, and Dr. Michel Bergeron, chair of the Infectious Diseases Research Centre at

Laval University. Among the ex-officio members is US CDC Director Julie Gerberding.

Naylor stresses that the panel's primary duty is not to assign blame. "The purpose of this panel is not so much to second guess current activities to contain SARS, but rather to look at what we can learn from this episode."

Ontario Health Minister Tony Clement has already promised a "new normal" for health care institutions because of SARS, including reduced use of casual labour and changes in infection control practices.

"It's important that we keep our options and minds open," says Naylor. "For example, do we really want all doctors to work in only one institution?"

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At a minimum, is it possible that we need a flexible pool of experts in infectious disease who may primarily work in hospital A, but will be ready to move to hospital Z if Z becomes the lead institution in battling an outbreak? As we move toward a 'new normal,' we should be careful not to create new problems." Naylor expects the panel to produce its initial findings in 60 days. — *Steve Wharry, CMAJ*

## Newfoundland bans drivers' use of hand-held phones

Newfoundland and Labrador has become the first province to disconnect motorists from their hand-held cell phones. The move came after lobbying by the Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association (NLMA), local police and the RCMP, says NLMA President John Haggie.

George Sweeney, minister of government services and lands, believes the phones pose a significant risk. "There are limits on human concentration. A driver's preoccupation with dialling and talking means that less attention is paid to driving. ... We are convinced cell phone use by drivers constitutes a serious diversion which must be discouraged."

Newfoundlanders appear to share that sentiment. In a government survey conducted last year, 95% of respondents considered cell phone use by drivers to be either a serious or a very serious health and safety problem. "Only 5% believe that all types of cell phone use should be permitted while driving," says Sweeney. "Fifty-five percent say the practice should be prohibited entirely, while 39% feel hands-free is acceptable."

Newfoundland and Labrador is not acting alone. At least 30 countries, including Japan, Russia and Australia, have introduced restrictions on cell phone use while driving. Two years ago, *CMAJ* called for similar regulations (164[11]:1557).

Studies indicate that talking on the phone distracts drivers, and holding a cell phone while driving inhibits physical movement. In 1997, Dr. Donald Redelmeier of the University of Toronto reported that talking on a cell phone while driving quadrupled the risk of an accident (*N Engl J Med* 1997;336:453-8).

Drivers in Newfoundland who continue to dial up while driving will face fines of up to \$180, with \$45 for a first offence. Each conviction will also cost drivers 4 demerit points. — *Donalee Moulton, Halifax*



Barbara Sibbald

**Not in Newfoundland, bye!**