

and Spread of SARS in Toronto (the Campbell report), states that “A combination of robust worker safety and infection control culture at the Vancouver General, with a better systemic preparedness ensured that BC was spared the devastation that befell Ontario.”

The 2003 report of the National Advisory Committee on SARS and Public Health also noted that respondents “highlighted weaknesses in systems for communicating infectious disease alerts from public health agencies to the operational levels of the health care system. The process for issuing alerts was apparently more successful in BC.” It recommended that provinces and territories improve “linkages between public health and segments of the personal services system (hospitals, home care agencies, primary care).”

In Saskatchewan’s regionalized system, for example, the chief medical officer of health for Saskatoon’s region “sits at the table” with the chief executive officers and vice presidents of hospitals and long-term care facilities in his region. Dr. Cory Neudorf says that when SARS hit Canada, “we had a plan in place quickly. We didn’t have to build links because they were already there.”

Neudorf says when public health operated at a municipal level, as it does in Ontario, “we had our hands full dealing with local issues, bylaws.” Regionalization allows public health to become part of the continuum of care and take a population health approach to prioritizing services. New links to acute care allow public health to use its surveillance to improve the whole system’s responsiveness to, for example, influenza outbreaks.

While other provinces began regionalizing 10 or 15 years ago, Ontario is “working from the back of the pack,” says Smitherman. However, Ontario is now taking “big strides forward,” he asserts, by establishing Local Health Integration Networks (LHINS), which are “responsible for” public and private hospitals, long-term care and some other services. The province retains responsibility for public health, physicians and drug plans. The result is “much better communication than we had before,” Smitherman says, noting in particular the province’s new integrated public health information system.

But Brenda Zimmerman, a professor with the Health Industry Management Program at York University’s Schulich Business School, argues that it is “very challenging” to get improved communication and knowledge transfer within the current governance structure in Ontario. That’s because within LHINS hospital governance structures have remained intact — “essentially an extra level of bureaucracy” each with its own protocols — whereas in regionalized systems individual hospital boards are disbanded.

Zimmerman says “there is a disconnect between the front line, government and the hospitals,” yet it is at the hospital level that policies are enacted. More attention needs to be paid to sharing learning and pooling resources among hospitals, she argues.

Dr. David Walker, dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at Queen’s University, notes that the 16 to 18 hospitals in his region each have different information systems and protocols. “We don’t have a system. It is not integrated or coordinated, not enough,” says Walker, who chaired an Ontario expert panel on SARS that reported in April 2004. “It is set up to be discordant,” like having a basketball team playing against a hockey team, he says. — Ann Silversides, Toronto

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.070184

Cisapride class-action suit approved

An Ontario Superior Court Justice has certified a class-action lawsuit against Johnson & Johnson, its Canadian subsidiary, Janssen-Ortho Inc. and the Attorney General of Canada, on behalf of Canadians who took the antireflux drug cisapride (Prepulsid).

Cisapride made headlines in March 2000 when Vanessa Young, 15, of Oakville, Ont. died of a heart arrhythmia after taking the drug to ease bloating related to bulimia. Cisapride was contraindicated for patients with bulimia.

Cisapride was pulled from the North American market a few months later. A

coroner’s jury ruled in 2001 that Young died of heart arrhythmia caused, at least in part, by cisapride toxicity. The jury made 50-plus recommendations, including mandatory reporting of adverse drug reactions by health care professionals and clear label warnings of contraindications. None of the major recommendations have been implemented.

An estimated 350 000 Canadians took cisapride. Lawyers involved in the case say thousands may have experienced adverse effects. In 2004, Johnson & Johnson agreed to pay up to \$90 million to settle US lawsuits involving more than 300 deaths and 16 000 injuries related to cisapride. The company has argued that physicians failed to properly prescribe the drug, especially to children.

The Canadian class action claims the company failed “to adequately warn Canadian physicians and their patients of the risks associated with ingesting [cisapride]” despite knowledge of serious problems, and that there was little scientific evidence the drug even worked.

The lead plaintiff, 69-year-old Aline Boulanger of Timmins, Ont. was prescribed prepulsid in 1995 and suffered chest pains and shortness of breath. She was diagnosed with ventricular tachycardia with prolonged QT interval that was linked to the use of cisapride. She continues to require heart medication.

Since Vanessa Young’s death, her father, Terrence Young, has been an outspoken advocate for drug safety reform. He says he hopes the class-action case, which is not expected to begin for a year or more (and only if litigants don’t settle out of court), will force changes in how doctors report adverse drug effects and how Health Canada manages drug safety issues.

“The delay in this case should show the federal government that the courts are a totally inadequate way to deal with prescription drug safety,” says Young.

When asked to comment, a spokesperson for Janssen-Ortho Inc. faxed a brief statement to the *CMAJ* indicating it had served notice of intent to appeal the decision and that the company believes the drug “is a safe and effective medicine when prescribed appropriately.” — Pauline Comeau, Ottawa

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.070156