The Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion is pleased to have enabled the development of this special supplement. The collection of seven articles is the culmination of significant effort by more than 20 Canadian researchers in applied nutrition, health promotion and population health.

What people eat is influenced by many factors, such as economic and social factors, the physical environment, the capacity to make healthy eating choices, time and skills to prepare food, and personal buying power. Appropriate action for the promotion and support of healthy eating requires a comprehensive evidence base.

Stakeholders identified the need to synthesize the existing evidence regarding the promotion and support of healthy eating before setting research priorities. The original synthesis papers developed in 2003-2004 and the summary articles in this journal supplement highlight “what we know” and identify knowledge gaps about the determinants of eating. This work offers a step forward in enhancing the evidence base. As the authors point out, the available literature does not support an examination of the complex interactions across determinants, and there is still much to understand. Knowledge development efforts in this area need to be supported so that our policy and program decisions better address the complexity of factors that influence eating behaviour. Understanding which strategies and interventions are most effective in promoting and supporting healthy eating is also an essential component of a comprehensive evidence base for program and policy decisions. However, a review of the effectiveness of interventions was beyond the scope of the synthesis work undertaken.

The articles in this supplement will be available for use by academics, policymakers and community health professionals. They provide not only a synthesis of existing literature and recommendations for research but also a basis for involvement in advocating for, or participating in, appropriate research to fill the evidence gaps. Continuing efforts will require partnerships among policy and program decision makers, practitioners and researchers. It is clear that understanding the underlying issues that determine eating behaviour will also require the involvement of other disciplines. Efforts by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to encourage interdisciplinary and cross-sector research provide hope that research on healthy eating in the context of population health will be enhanced and will supply a strong platform for filling our evidence gaps.

We are at an important moment in time when significant efforts are under way, both internationally and across our country, to support healthy living and prevent chronic diseases. In many cases, practice is ahead of the evidence base as a result of the pressures to take action. There is a need to learn from practice through appropriate research, evaluation and surveillance, and thereby strengthen the evidence base for future decisions.

This supplement offers a call to action. In our search for answers, we need to be creative in our approaches. As we look at the issue of healthy eating within a broad population health framework, we need to challenge ourselves to consider alternative and new frameworks, to work across sectors and with other disciplines. With a coherent approach and collaborative efforts to strengthen our knowledge base, we will contribute to improved nutritional health of Canadians.

REFERENCES