It is timely that the Canadian Public Health Association held the Second Canadian Conference on Literacy and Health in October 2004 and the results are found for all to learn from in this supplement. In March 2005, the Public Health Agency of Canada launched a major public consultation process involving all sectors and communities. The process is identifying goals for improving the health and well-being of Canadians.

A common theme that is emerging reinforces the knowledge that to be successful, we must employ the tools and strategies that assist Canadians in their desire to live healthier lives and avoid illness and injury.

While it is clear that quitting smoking, good nutrition, maintaining a healthy weight and activity, and avoiding injury are all important to health, to be truly successful in improving and sustaining health, we must understand and address the underlying factors. These include the social, demographic, and economic determinants. We know these areas have a great impact on the health of individuals. They offer great potential to reduce inequities in the health of Canadians.

Recent studies suggest that literacy skills may predict health status even more accurately than education level, income, or other socio-demographic variables. We continue to improve our understanding of the complex ways in which the determinants interact, and of the nature of poverty’s being more than a question of economics. Literacy and health is, therefore, an important area of research, policy, and practice.

People with low literacy skills are more likely to suffer chronic health problems and die younger. The potential magnitude of the problem becomes apparent when studies identify that as many as half of Canadian adults lack the skills required to find, understand, assess, and communicate health-related information.

In Canada, we continue efforts to better understand and address the impact of health determinants. The articles in this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* provide a valuable snapshot of the current work on literacy and health in Canada – one of the keys if we hope to work with Canadians to strive to be the healthiest people possible.

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