Postscript

Learning from the Experience of Developing and Running Canada on the Move

Adria Rose, MD, MPH
Diane Finegood, PhD

Canada on the Move (COTM) developed initially as an opportunistic attempt to provide researchers with unique and useful information on a private sector health-related sales marketing initiative. The articles within this supplement describe how the timing, context and willing engagement of key research, policy and practice leaders allowed the project to expand into a research data collection mechanism associated with a number of health promotion efforts across the country. They also highlight how the project became a springboard for much more complex discussions on public-private partnerships, health promotion, health behaviour change, media messaging around public health, exploration of different research methodologies, and capacity-building. This article describes how the experience of developing and running Canada on the Move has given us two additional important insights relevant to the future of population-level research.

Health promotion/disease prevention research can successfully draw together a wide range of sectors

From its inception, Canada on the Move reached out to a variety of individuals and organizations and found supporters within government agencies, non-governmental organizations, for-profit organizations, academic institutions, employee workplace and community-based health promotion initiatives. Any significant awareness of the project reflects this broad-based support, as we relied almost entirely on communications efforts initiated by others to promote the project. We experienced evidence of this support in the form of a steady stream of requests for information and participation from a variety of groups eager to “donate their steps to health research” and use the website’s step-tracking tools within their own health promotion efforts.

An analysis of the COTM contacts database between January 2004 and May 2005 confirmed the variety of sectors involved (see Figure 1). Attendees and participants in various COTM-related activities constituted approximately half of this database. The rest of the contacts came through efforts by staff to develop the project and disseminate information on it, as well as by requests for information received through the website. Of the 217 organizations listed in the database, non-governmental organizations comprised almost half (43%). The remainder included government or health-care organizations (19%); for-profit organizations, including employee worksite health promotion programs and partnership proposals, (14%); academic institutions, ranging from elementary schools to universities (11%); and others unable to be classified due to insufficient information (13%).

Not only were many types of groups interested in Canada on the Move as a whole, a variety of sectors participated in each of the project’s activities (see Figure 2). These activities included several meetings and consultations as well as formal and informal partnerships. Besides the breadth of interest, we also noted a striking level of commitment to the project among a subset of those involved. Staff had contact with multiple individuals at 10% of the organizations, including the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Public Health Agency of Canada and the University of Alberta. In addition, 22% of those who participated in COTM-related activities participated in two or more of the events; the majority of these highly involved individuals were researchers from academic institutions. Clearly, COTM demonstrates the potential for health promotion/disease prevention research to serve as common ground for intersectoral efforts in the future.

Canadian health promotion/disease prevention researchers, practitioners and policy-makers recognize the need for integrated information-exchange systems useful at the individual, community/program and population levels

The response to Canada on the Move has highlighted convergent needs within the health promotion/disease prevention research, policy and practice communities. Despite their different perspectives, interests and responsibilities, these groups share a need for access to mechanisms for collecting, organizing and sharing information useful for individual assessment, program evaluation and population-level research. The ability of COTM to provide participating individuals with even simple graphs of their steps over time sparked significant interest in the project, particularly among employee wellness and community-based health promotion/disease prevention practitioners. The authors included in this supplement competed for minimal support in order to have access to information collected by the project; their participation demonstrates strong interest within the research community to explore population-level “natural experiments”. Although the project did not have the capacity to offer group/community-level summary information, we repeatedly met with strong and persistent demand for this feedback.

Recognizing the strong interest in a comprehensive system of information exchange and the limited capacity of the current COTM project to meet these needs, we began to contemplate expanding COTM. We initiated a partnership with the Canadian Diabetes Association and Dietitians of Canada, funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, to guide our next steps. The partnership culminated in the Getting Canada on the Move meeting in March 2005, which gathered more than 50 health promotion/disease prevention practitioners (51%), researchers (31%) and

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1. Director of Partnerships for Canada on the Move, Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism, and Diabetes, Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR-INMD)
2. Scientific Director, CIHR-INMD

Correspondence and reprint requests: Diane Finegood, Scientific Director, Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism, and Diabetes, Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Dr., Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6, Tel: 604-291-3319, E-mail: Finegood@sfu.ca
policy-makers (18%) with national, regional/provincial/territorial and city/local perspectives. The meeting enabled rich discussion among the diverse participants about the project’s strengths and limitations and confirmed strong interest in research as the foundation of the project. However, they warned that Canada on the Move would not be sustainable if it did not also provide group-level feedback that could be used in program evaluation. In this way, the meeting participants created a mandate for a multi-level system that would organize data to support decision-making and learning at the individual, group/program and population levels.

The interest in an integrated data collection and information exchange system that we noted at the Getting Canada on the Move meeting has been building for several years and continues to evolve. Increasing convergence among efforts promoting knowledge creation, synthesis and exchange; best practice identification; evidence-based practice and “practice-based evidence”; and accountability suggests that an integrated information system to support these and other needs may soon be not only possible but also in high demand.

Looking to the Future
The Canada on the Move project has created new knowledge and stimulated thinking and discussion about a novel research approach. The project has also 1) highlighted the feasibility of intersectoral collaboration through health promotion/disease prevention research and 2) revealed broad interest in an integrated system of knowledge development and exchange that can provide feedback at the individual and group/program levels while contributing to population-level research. Momentum is building towards an integrated data system that would meet the needs of multiple stakeholders, and we will continue to explore how Canada on the Move can best contribute.

REFERENCES
3. Attributed by others to unpublished works by Larry Green.