Healthy Canada by Design: Translating science into action and prevention

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Ten years ago, few readers of the Canadian Journal of Public Health would have had more than a passing acquaintance with the issue of the built environment and health. Today, it has entered the mainstream of public health practice. The topic appears on conference programs, students expect to hear about it, and more research is undertaken and published. From 1993 to 2003, Medline listed 176 articles related to the built environment; between 2003 and 2013, there were 1,003. Most published studies examine relationships among land use planning, walkability, active transportation and a variety of health outcomes, such as body mass and diabetes, as well as topics as diverse as social connectedness, injuries and air quality.

What can we conclude from this body of research? Cross-sectional associations – such as those between land use planning measures, particularly residential density, use of active means of transportation, and the prevalence of obesity – have been consistently replicated. This evidence is far from conclusive, however; there are few results from longitudinal studies, and methodological challenges abound. For instance, measurements of land use characteristics on one geographic scale may not capture the whole effects on a different scale: example, a small oasis of new urbanism set in a large area of car-dependent suburbs may not be completely effective. The challenge often lies in the inherent complexities of the objects under study: built form, systems of land use and transportation planning, and interventions.

The papers in this supplement describe some of the activities of HCBD taking place in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, and the progress that has resulted. Macfarlane and colleagues, writing about Toronto, provide a reminder that the built environment as a health issue has, in some places, a history of several decades, in the form of the Healthy Cities movement, providing a foundation for the current initiatives. Montreal has a history of engaging neighbourhoods and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in issues concerning the built environment, as related in the paper by Dubé and colleagues on the participation of citizens in the development of public policies for active transportation.

The paper by Gagnon and Bellefleur examines two aspects of the development of healthy public policies: predicting effects and assessing political viability. The first of these is taken up by Ulmer et al., who describe the application of an evidence-based software.
tool in a health impact evaluation of the redevelopment of a brownfield site in Toronto. The paper by Moloughney et al. describes another evidence-based tool and how it is being adopted for routine use in the assessment of development proposals, mainly in greenfield sites, in the Region of Peel. Miro and colleagues reflect upon the experience in British Columbia in increasing the capacity to participate in planning processes for land use and transportation, building relationships among stakeholders and influencing plans and policies. Last, illustrating the issue of political acceptability, the results of a residential preferences survey conducted in the Greater Toronto Area and Metro Vancouver by Frank and colleagues demonstrate a demand for walkable communities that is not being fully met by present patterns of development.

The projects described here show how it is possible to build upon empirical evidence to develop initiatives that test practical approaches and to share the findings with others. These represent a small part of the activity undertaken by public health in collaboration with planners, transportation engineers, NGOs and others across Canada. At the same time, we must continue to assess new practices as rigorously as possible in order to produce knowledge that is generalizable. This will be challenging, for the reasons given above; however, only through a combination of both empirical research and theoretically informed, critical observation of practice will this field continue to advance.

REFERENCES

6. Warner M, Götschi T, Martin-Diever E, Kahlmeier S, Martin BW. Active transport: An evidence-based tool and how it is being adopted for routine use in the assessment of development proposals, mainly in greenfield sites, in the Region of Peel. Miro and colleagues reflect upon the experience in British Columbia in increasing the capacity to participate in planning processes for land use and transportation, building relationships among stakeholders and influencing plans and policies. Last, illustrating the issue of political acceptability, the results of a residential preferences survey conducted in the Greater Toronto Area and Metro Vancouver by Frank and colleagues demonstrate a demand for walkable communities that is not being fully met by present patterns of development.