Preface

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Healthy eating is a critical contributor to overall health at every stage of development and is equally important in reducing the risk of many chronic diseases. Food choices are complex decisions that are influenced by the relation between individual and collective factors, including social and physical environments. Promoting healthy eating for all Canadians requires a better understanding of these factors and their interactions. Currently, significant knowledge gaps exist in our evidence base to support policy and program development. This supplement of the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* provides a collection of summary articles highlighting key findings from a series of synthesis papers on the determinants of healthy eating recently completed for Health Canada’s Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion (ONPP).

Background

In 2003-2004, a project was undertaken to synthesize the literature on determinants of healthy eating. This project grew out of recommendations from an overview of key knowledge gaps for promotion and support of healthy eating undertaken in 2001. Through the synthesis of information provided by more than 50 key informants, important knowledge gaps and research needs with respect to determinants of healthy eating and the effectiveness of interventions to promote healthy eating were identified.\textsuperscript{1} Key informants specifically pointed to the need to consolidate, synthesize and disseminate what is already known in these areas. This was considered necessary for the development of research agendas, to provide a base of information to help inform policy and funding decisions, and to support application and evaluation of best practices.

Scope of the synthesis papers

*Nutrition for Health: An Agenda for Action*, Canada’s national plan of action on nutrition, considers the multiple factors that influence healthy eating and nutritional health within the Framework for Population Health.\textsuperscript{2} This Framework, which recognizes that both individual and collective factors affect health and that these factors interact, provided the foundation for the synthesis papers (see Figure 1). “Healthy eating” was defined as “eating practices and behaviours that are consistent with improving, maintaining, and/or enhancing health”. The original papers i) summarize the published literature on individual and collective determinants of healthy eating, ii) highlight gaps in knowledge about the determinants and iii) recommend areas for research to address the identified gaps. While it is essential to understand that policies and programs are the foundations for action in promoting and supporting healthy eating, critically reviewing the available evidence on their role was beyond the scope of this project.

Various approaches were considered for the selection of topics for the synthesis papers. The goal was to select a feasible approach that would have the greatest potential for advancing knowledge of the determinants of healthy eating. Ultimately, the papers were oriented by life stage and/or sub-population in an effort to facilitate identification of interrelations between determinants – a key principle of population health. This approach was consistent with the findings from the key informant survey, which concluded that knowledge gaps are probably best addressed through research directed to specific populations. In addition to children and adolescents, seniors, and Aboriginal peoples, the issues of food insecurity and healthy weights were considered priorities regarding the promotion and support of healthy eating.

Building on these priority areas, as well as specific program needs, the synthesis papers focussed on the following topics: children and youth; seniors; Aboriginal populations; low-income populations; perceptions of healthy eating; and the bidirectional relation between mental health and eating behaviours. At the time this work was initiated, a synthesis of the literature related to healthy weights was under way through a process led by the Canadian Population Health Initiative (CPHI) of the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI).\textsuperscript{†} This topic was not, therefore, pursued in this series of synthesis papers.

The original synthesis papers were written by Canadian researchers in applied nutrition, health promotion, and/or population health, with particular expertise in the chosen topic areas. Outlines and draft versions of each of the papers were critically reviewed by two to three peer reviewers, as well as the Health Canada project managers. In total, 22 Canadian researchers were involved as authors or reviewers of the original synthesis papers.

The synthesis

The methods employed to select and critically review the literature are described in each of the papers. Generally, the authors searched relevant electronic databases and hand-searched key journals, covering literature published in the 10 to 15 years preceding 2004. The literature in English and French was reviewed. Literature from countries other than Canada was included, but the authors were asked to consider the applicability of the findings from international sources to the Canadian context. On the basis of the literature synthesis, knowl-

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\textsuperscript{†} Development of the synthesis paper on determinants of healthy eating among Aboriginal Canadians was undertaken in collaboration with Community Programs Directorate, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, Health Canada.

\textsuperscript{†} Overweight and Obesity in Canada: A Population Health Perspective (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2004) is a principal product of this work.
edge gaps and directions for further research were identified.

Overview
With the exception of the first article by Dr. Kim Raine, the articles in this supplement represent summaries of the original synthesis papers completed for the ONPP. The article by Dr. Raine provides an overview of the complex set of interactions among the determinants of healthy eating. Dr. Raine synthesizes key findings from the original synthesis papers and considers implications for healthy public policy.

The next article focuses on the perceptions of healthy eating. Dr. Marie-Claude Paquette builds on theoretical models suggesting that individuals’ ideals and assumptions about food are key determinants of food choice.

The third and fourth articles consider determinants of healthy eating of particular relevance to two life-stage groups. Drs. Jennifer Taylor, Susan Evers and Mary McKenna look at the factors that influence healthy eating in children and youth, and Drs. Hélène Payette and Bryna Shatenstein synthesize the key determinants of healthy eating among community-dwelling elderly people.

Dr. Noreen Willows’ paper follows, with a focus on Canada’s Aboriginal populations.

Building on sociological theory, Dr. Elaine Power considers the determinants of healthy eating among low-income Canadians, including factors related to socio-economic gradients in eating patterns, food insecurity and inequalities in diet.

The final paper in the supplement, by Drs. Janet Polivy and C. Peter Herman, focusses on the bi-directional relation between mental health and eating behaviours.

Each of the papers summarizes the existing literature, identifies gaps in knowledge and offers recommendations for research to enhance the evidence base on the determinants of healthy eating relative to the particular topic discussed. Collectively, the research recommendations presented in this supplement will be an important component of further efforts to build and implement a broader strategy for enhancing the evidence base for promoting and supporting healthy eating in Canada.

Figure 1. Framework for Population Health

REFERENCES