Health Promotion Strategies: Addressing Issues That Affect Us All

Dawn Walker, RN

While rushing between meetings in different parts of the city recently, I encountered an imposed time of reflection, waiting for a lift bridge to complete its course before traffic could proceed. Not going anywhere fast, I looked around and was amazed at the diversity of activities within my immediate surroundings. There were young people on in-line skates, a family on bicycles, two seniors walking their dogs, a caregiver with her client in a wheelchair enjoying the pathway and a group of school children, together waiting to continue their field trip.

Initially my reaction was to focus on the number of people and types of activities for a pleasant summer day. Then I noticed that everyone was wearing protective gear: kneepads, helmets, gloves, hats and sunglasses. And I thought: wow! – the health promotion and injury prevention messages are getting through! The increases in the number of people living actively, participating in day-to-day activities such as walking, jogging and bicycling are evident in all age groups, and the benefits of friendships and social supports to our health and well-being are being recognized. In my scene, no one was smoking, although nationally and globally, smoking remains our number one public health problem.

This scene seemed somewhat idyllic but similar scenes are happening across the country. Members of communities are working together to address many of the health and well-being concerns through health promotion programs: well-baby clinics, smoking cessation programs, safe routes to school, child car restraints, healthy eating and active lifestyles, and recreational and social supports, to name only a few.

While clear, direct results are difficult to measure at a national level at this time, we are seeing results. Injury rates are still high but are levelling off, and the incidence of drunk driving is falling, although alcohol still remains a main cause of collision deaths. In general, Canadians are more active and living longer, meaningful lives.

Communities across Canada are mobilizing to varying degrees in support of early child development. More and more leaders in our communities are understanding the sentiments expressed by Her Excellency the Governor General, in the Speech from the Throne at the opening of the Second Session of the Thirty-sixth Parliament of Canada on October 12, 1999, that “No commitment we make today will be more important for the long-term prosperity and well-being of our society than the commitment to invest our efforts in very young children. Parents and families have the primary responsibility for the care of their children, but all society must work together to develop the abilities to succeed.”

Many community programs are now being funded by partnerships involving municipal, provincial, and federal governments and corporations.

However, we still have some way to go as a society as young people are one group often left out. “Despite the United Nations declaration that, for seven years in a row, Canada is the best place in the world to live, accounting for standard of living and quality of life, our record of rates of child poverty, relative to other industrialized countries, is appallingly poor… Most importantly, this less than enviable ‘social record’ occurs in a political context in which children and youth are modern scapegoats for most social problems. Political lobbies to create a safer society are often directed at legislation such as the Young Offenders Act as too lenient, schools as too tolerant of diversity, parents as too uncaring and children as increasingly menacing…many argue that children and youth are relatively disenfranchised in this society and that this disenfranchisement places them at varying degrees of risk depending on social characteristics like age, class, gender, and geography.”

In response, programs like the Healthy Communities – Healthy Youth are springing up. According to Keith Pattinson, Regional Director, Boys and Girls Club of British Columbia, “the concept is really a matter of getting back to basics, more importantly, of understanding why people today do not feel empowered to take personal action in a society organized around services, not communities; of a citizenry living in communities which no longer have expectations that anyone other than the parents and those paid to do it should take any responsibility for the well-being of children and adolescents.” The program proposes that we re-direct our attention to 40 developmental assets identified as the foundation upon which healthy development of all young people will take place.

What we have learned from these successful experiences is that we must expand our networks. We know that many of the broader yet substantial health determinants are beyond the control of the individual and still require changes to the overall system; that we must increase our efforts to provide adequate housing and income, and clean environments. Health promotion principles have been embraced by many sectors, mainly those directly involved in health and wellness. Many others such as environmentalists, urban planners, trans-
Stratégies de promotion de la santé : aborder les enjeux qui nous touchent tous

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Récemment, alors que je quittais rapidement une réunion pour me rendre à une autre réunion qui devait avoir lieu dans un autre secteur de la ville, je me suis vu imposer un moment de réflexion en attendant qu’un pont levant termine son trajet afin que la circulation puisse reprendre. Étant donné que je roule au ralenti, j’ai jeté un coup d’œil aux alentours et j’étais stupéfait par la diversité des activités qui se déroulaient dans les environs immédiats. Il y avait des jeunes sur des patins à roues alignés, une famille à bicyclette, deux personnes âgées qui promenaient leurs chiens, une professionnelle de la santé avec son client en chaise roulante qui circulaient sur un sentier et un groupe d’éclectro qui attendaient, ensemble, avant de poursuivre leur excursion scolaire.

Au début j’ai porté attention au nombre de personnes et au genre d’activités qu’elles pratiquaient pendant cette agréable journée d’été. Puis, je me suis rendu compte que tout le monde portait du matériel de protection : des genouillères, des casques, des gants, des chapeaux et des lunettes de soleil. Je me suis dit que c’était incroyable, car les gens avaient tenu compte des messages de promotion de la santé et de la prévention des blessures ! L’accroissement du nombre de personnes qui mènent une vie active, qui participent à des activités quotidiennes comme la marche, la course à pied et la bicyclette est évidente dans tous les groupes d’âge. De plus, les avantages de liens d’amitié et du soutien de la collectivité à notre santé et à notre bien-être sont en train d’être reconnus. Là où je me trou-