

A. HEALTH PROMOTION AND PREVENTION OF ILLNESS

A variety of witnesses, particularly those involved in studies of population health and epidemiology, recommended that the federal government involve itself in a major way in the development of a long-term health policy giving top priority to health factors related to the environment and quality of life, including the living conditions and development of young children. Such a policy, in their view, would perhaps have greater positive impact on health in the long term than increased spending on the medical-hospital sector.

Because improved health is associated with improved standards of living, some witnesses consider it essential that any health promotion and disease prevention program directed to a disadvantaged group be preceded by social programs guaranteeing an income permitting that group to be adequately housed and fed. This is part of a call for a broader definition of health that goes beyond that of the present health care delivery system (Canadian Dietetic Association, Consumers' Association of Canada, Canadian Health Coalition, Canadian Institute of Child Health, National Advisory Council on Aging, Victorian Order of Nurses). Accordingly, such organizations recommend that governments redirect health care dollars to programs of prevention and promotion, including initiatives to alleviate the social causes of illness. Some witness groups expressed, for example, the need for more health promotion programs that would produce behavioural changes and help reduce risks to health associated with lifestyle, such as the use of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs, and poor dietary habits (Canadian Institute of Child Health, Canadian Dietetic Association, Consumers' Association of Canada).

The federal government has a long history of involvement in the prevention of illness and disease, including measures to protect the supply of food, water and drugs for medical purposes, promoting good nutrition and the prevention and spread of infectious diseases.

Since the 1970s, the Canadian government has embraced a health promotion approach to health. Health promotion, based on a World Health Organization model, is referred to as a "holistic" approach because it focuses on the physical and social environment as it relates to the health of the population (environmental pollution, family violence, highway accidents, stress, substance abuse, etc.). Health promotion within the health care field itself implies the sharing of responsibility and resources by governments and health professionals, with individuals planning their personal health strategies with community and other support groups not previously regarded as part of the health care team.