Making the Case for the Crucial Role of Physical Activity in the Future of Canada’s Health Care System

Abstract

The Coalition for Active Living is a national action group advocating for health promotion/disease prevention and the broader determinants of health. The goal of the Coalition is to ensure that the environments where Canadians live, work, learn and play support regular physical activity. Despite the irrefutable evidence linking physical activity with physiological and psycho-social health benefits for people of all ages, Canadians find little time in their daily life to be physically active. Approximately 57-64% of all Canadians are not active enough to reap such health benefits. Further, evidence demonstrates that the least physically active Canadians are un- or under-employed, have lower incomes and education levels, are smokers, experience more stress, and have poorer overall health. It seems that those who could benefit the most from including exercise in their lives, are the least active.

Rather than focusing on health practices as rational behaviours that one chooses to do at random, the notion of lifestyle is more useful once we understand the determinants of lifestyle choice – that is, what factors and conditions influence our lifestyle habits. The best investments in healthy lifestyles are community-based initiatives and strategies that improve basic living conditions and strengthen communities. Indeed, as the Romanow Commission well knows “the solutions lie in social interventions, such as restoring and enhancing physical education programs in schools, building community playgrounds, or creating bike paths”. With childhood obesity, and adult diabetes rising to epidemic proportions in this country, along with an aging population, physical activity is a cost-effective and efficacious strategy for curtailing spiraling health care costs and improving quality of life. The Coalition for Active Living applauds the Commission’s goal to balance investments in prevention and health maintenance with those directed at care and treatment. Our presentation will highlight the evidence supporting a population health approach to fostering physical activity and urge the Commission to go even further ‘upstream,’ to consider universal and health promoting physical activity strategies and policies as part of the future of health care in Canada.

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COALITION FOR ACTIVE LIVING

Working to ensure that the environments where Canadians live, learn, work and play support regular physical activity

The Coalition for Active Living was founded in November 1999. Coalition members are committed to work together towards a healthy, active Canada.

1. What is the VISION of the Coalition?
The vision of active living in Canada is one in which Canadians value and integrate regular physical activity into their daily lives.

2. What is the Coalition’s MISSION?
The members of the Coalition will work together to develop, implement and evaluate the outcomes of joint actions which will enable physical activity to be integrated into the lives of all Canadians.

3. What is the GOAL of the Coalition for Active Living?
To ensure that the environments where Canadians live, work, learn and play support regular physical activity.

4. What is the Coalition doing to take action on physical inactivity?
The Coalition has a six-point action plan (attached). The Action Plan identifies issues and recommends solutions decision-makers.

5. How do members of the Coalition work together?
The Coalition is not separate from its parts. It IS the membership and the participants. Members must have a commitment to the Coalition’s vision, mission and goals. Leadership is provided by a Board of Directors, representing various regions and interests. Funding for the Coalition is provided by Health Canada. Members contribute financial and human resources to getting the job done.

6. What is important to the Coalition?
- shared leadership
- partnerships
- shared power and decision making
- empowerment and belief in the value of collective action
- need to be community-relevant through community participation
- need to be inclusive
- a multi-sectoral, multi-level approach
- accountability to the Coalition membership
- respect for the individual mandates of the members
- respect for the individuality and autonomy of each and every member
- respect for both official languages
- representation by volunteers, staff or both
• shared credit, effective communications and networking

7. **Is there a fee to join?**
   No. Rather members will be expected to contribute human and financial resources to furthering the work of the Coalition.

8. **I/my organization would like to become a member. How do I do that?**
   Go to the Coalition Website: [www.activeliving.ca](http://www.activeliving.ca) and sign on.

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A Plan for Action

A. PREAMBLE

In order to determine the issues that the Coalition for Active Living could address, nationwide consultations were held from December 2000 to January 2001. Some 200 active living leaders across Canada were asked to identify (a) the most critical national issues relating to physical activity, (b) some effective and realistic solutions to these issues and c) the specific actions that CAL could take in the short term.

The consultations affirmed the need for a strong national voice and an identification of five national issues:
• infrastructure
• Access
• Children and Youth
• Diversity
• Communication.

In April 2001, active living leaders from across Canada met to develop compelling descriptions of the five national issues; identify the evidence of the nature, scope and importance of the issues; propose policies and actions to address the issues; and identify decision-makers who could act on the proposed policies and actions.

Representatives from 38 organizations across Canada met in June 2001 to adopt the Plan of Action and to discuss ways of influencing key decision-makers to act on the six-point plan. They also determined that the Coalition should be defined as an “action” coalition whose only purpose is to advocate for and promote the Coalition for Active Living Plan of Action.
B. STATE OF AFFAIRS

Physical Inactivity: A Canadian Epidemic

During the 1970s and 1980s, Canadians embraced physical activity with enthusiasm and vigour. Throughout the 1990s, however, participation slackened alarmingly, and in all segments of the population. Today, the trend to physical inactivity is reaching epidemic proportions.

The irony is that most Canadians recognize the benefits of physical activity to their overall well-being, health, independence, and quality of life. They say they understand the vital role that physical activity plays in controlling the costs of health care. They acknowledge that physical activity has a positive impact on academic performance, youth behaviour, and workplace productivity.

Still they remain inactive, despite the many pitfalls of physical inactivity. One of the most compelling is the escalating incidence of childhood and youth obesity which has doubled in recent years. A major factor is the nationwide failure to adopt mandatory physical education in Canada’s schools, despite widespread support for such action. Another factor is the failure to support initiatives that ensure other physical activity opportunities for our children.

Canada is not alone. In every country around the world where physical inactivity is a concern, efforts to promote healthy behaviours are clear on one point: even when citizens support a healthy lifestyle, they must first be educated about its value and second, must be assured of access to physical activities that are attractive and safe.

Why the Erosion?

*The Coalition for Active Living knows why physical activity in Canada has steadily eroded over the past decade.*

**FACT:** Physical education in our schools has been cut — drastically.

**FACT:** Physical activity opportunities during non-school hours have been cut.

**FACT:** Recreation budgets have been cut to a dangerous level resulting in fewer leaders, fewer training opportunities for those who remain, and reduced programming.

**FACT:** Poor maintenance of aging municipal facilities, workplaces, and schools has led to an inability to attract clientele or to adequately serve the needs of those who do come.

**FACT:** Schedules and programs fail to consider accessibility.
FACT: Safety factors and integration barriers prevent seniors and persons with a disability from participating in physical activity.

FACT: Fees for programs and facilities, both indoors and outdoors, discourage physical activity among the economically disadvantaged.

FACT: Programs and facilities fail to keep up with changing cultural and demographic trends.

FACT: Transportation and urban planning are designed for cars, not legs, creating environments that fail to support and encourage active living.

FACT: A motivating media campaign that portrays physical activity as the norm and shows how easily a physically active lifestyle can be achieved is not in place.

FACT: Governments, health professionals, service providers, and the media fail to provide consistent messaging about the values and varieties of physical activity.

**Stamping Out the Epidemic**

The Coalition for Active Living calls upon parents, health care professionals, and decision-makers at all levels, public, private, and non-governmental sectors to stamp out the physical inactivity epidemic.

Because this issue is on a par with the plagues of tobacco, drug abuse, and HIV/AIDS, physical inactivity demands open and frank discussion backed by a meaningful allocation of resources and a six-point action plan.
C. A SIX-POINT PLAN OF ACTION FOR A PHYSICALLY ACTIVE CANADA

POINT 1
Establish national, targeted, ongoing, and state-of-the-art communications for distribution to the media and advertising agencies. Develop messages that are consistent, reach all levels of the population, and strongly promote specific opportunities for physical activity where Canadians live, learn, work, and play.

POINT 2
Implement a comprehensive plan to educate children and youth about the importance of physical education and how to access activity within the community in order to make healthy lifestyle choices.

POINT 3
Advocate for new and upgraded transportation systems that include the creation of safe, effective, and accessible paths and networks for cycling, walking, and wheeling.

POINT 4
Advocate for the removal of barriers to publicly funded facilities and programs. Address unaffordable fees, poorly maintained facilities, reduced schedules and programs, diminished human resources, and the ever-increasing cultural diversity of activity interests.

POINT 5
Advocate for adequately funded health promotion and for physical activity to be recognized as a priority to be integrated into a wide range of community health initiatives.

POINT 6
Advocate that employers adopt policies that promote, support, and reward physical activity in the workplace.

The Coalition for Active Living pledges to urge elected officials and decision-makers in health, education, recreation, and business to develop and adopt policies that will stamp out the physical inactivity epidemic.
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Rather than focusing on health practices as rational behaviours that one chooses to do at random, the notion of lifestyle is more useful once we understand the determinants of lifestyle choice – that is, what factors and conditions influence our lifestyle habits. The best investments in healthy lifestyles are community-based initiatives and strategies that improve basic living conditions and strengthen communities. Indeed, as the Romanow Commission well knows “the solutions lie in social interventions, such as restoring and enhancing physical education programs in schools, building community playgrounds, or creating bike paths”. With childhood obesity, and adult diabetes rising to epidemic proportions in this country, along with an aging population, physical activity is a cost-effective and efficacious strategy for curtailing spiraling health care costs and improving quality of life. The Coalition for Active Living applauds the Commission’s goal to balance investments in prevention and health maintenance with those directed at care and treatment. Our presentation will highlight the evidence supporting a population health approach to fostering physical activity and urge the Commission to go even further ‘upstream,’ to consider universal and health promoting physical activity strategies and policies as part of the future of health care in Canada.