

## 27 Years of Public Health Nutrition at the Peterborough County-City Health Unit

In *The Cost of Malnutrition in Canada*, Sabry (1975) estimated that improved nutrition of the Canadian population could save \$2.5 billion per year on hospitalization and medical-dental care, and could reduce productivity losses and absenteeism. Sabry's paper and the *Nutrition Canada Survey* (1972) prompted investment in public health nutrition programs to contribute to the health of individuals and to the health and economy of communities. The first Peterborough County-City Health Unit (PCCHU) Public Health Nutritionist (PHN) was hired in 1980. There are now three PHNs, two Community Workers working on food action programs, and a Health Promoter who coordinates the Student Nutrition Programs - Food for Kids Peterborough.

In 1980, the PHN worked with organizations, community members, nursing and dental staff, the media, and schools to ensure the public received accurate and reliable information. Since 1987, Public Health Nutrition core functions also included environmental support and policy development as emphasized in the updated Mandatory Health Programs and Services Guidelines (MHPSG). In 1989, the Ministry of Health added the following nutrition program standard: *"The Board of Health shall support and encourage community-initiated efforts to promote increased access to sufficient, nutritious and personally acceptable foods, and the development of food policies in schools and other food premises as appropriate."* The PCCHU responded by building food action programs with community partners including a food costing/advocacy system, collective kitchens, and student nutrition programs. These were subsequently integrated into the 1997 MHPSG that also encouraged health units to work with schools, restaurants, grocery stores and workplaces to support healthy eating.

### CCHU Actions Based on These Guidelines:

**Local Supermarket Tours** assist people (1200 participants since 2003) in making healthier choices by providing the knowledge and tools to help them understand food labels. **The Eat Smart! Restaurant Program** with local restaurants, secondary school and workplace cafeterias awards annual Eat Smart! Awards of Excellence; 37 at last count with numbers growing each year. PHNs have worked with school boards and food service vendors to improve the availability of healthy choices within cafeterias and are collaborating with school staff and students to encourage the purchase of healthier foods.

**Student Nourishment Programs** were limited in 1987 to working with schools by providing tools and lesson plans. In 1992, the PCCHU partnered to start breakfast programs

in downtown schools. Food For Kids Peterborough expansion has been such that 74% of area schools (n = 40) have 55 programs with 6,400 participants (2005-2006 data). Advocacy to the local MPP for a provincial student nourishment program helped lead to the 1994 program launch that by 2005, saw an \$8.5 million Ministry of Children and Youth program support student nutrition partnerships.

**Poverty and Nutrition:** The National Council of Welfare (2007) reported that the percentage of people living below the poverty line has not changed in 25 years. With recognition in the 1990s of barriers to healthy eating on low incomes, the PCCHU began food cost surveys. The Nutritious Food Basket findings were that low income families spent a larger percentage of income on food than others. The PHNs and others use the reports to advocate for improved incomes, and remain actively involved in food security advocacy and income security initiatives. The PCCHU Board of Health supports these efforts by endorsing the social determinants of health and writing letters to the government encouraging improvements to social programs for vulnerable community members.

**Food Action Programs:** PHNs partnered in developing food programs to increase food access for those on low incomes. Recognition of the need in the 1990s to improve coordination of food banks, food donations and other charitable food distribution systems resulted in Kawartha Food Share (with 30 member agencies). Food action programs were developed involving participants and fostering self-help, mutual support and community development. In 2006, these included monthly distribution of 550 food boxes, 10 monthly collective kitchens, 14 trips to glean produce from fields, and five community gardens.

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