

## OFFICE OF THE CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH

### Position Statement: Healthy Food Environments in Healthcare Facilities

The Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health strongly supports the development of healthy food environments in all health-care settings, in order to encourage and facilitate healthy nutrition choices for all New Brunswickers.

#### Background

The health of a population is influenced by a variety of factors. Personal health behaviours such as smoking, being physically active and eating a healthy diet play an important role in defining ones' health. However, New Brunswickers have much to improve upon in these areas. Some data suggest that we are above the national average for rates of smoking, obesity, physical inactivity and poor mental health and wellness.<sup>1,2</sup> In relation to nutrition, surveys have shown that New Brunswickers (both adults and children) rank below the national average for the consumption of five or more vegetables and fruit per day.<sup>1,3</sup> In addition, the 2010-2011 N.B. Student Wellness Survey indicates that 75% of Grade 4 and 5 children reported eating non-nutritious foods (e.g., chips, candy, sweets, fries) at least once the day before the survey.<sup>4</sup>

Substantial research indicates that diet plays an important role in preventing obesity and chronic diseases.<sup>5</sup> A diet which is low in vegetables and fruit has been associated with higher rates of overweight and obesity (among children and adolescents), as well as certain cancers and cardiovascular disease.<sup>2,5</sup> Poor eating habits, in addition to other risk factors for chronic diseases, translate into current and future health problems. The human and financial cost of these problems will continue to rise and exert pressure on our healthcare system in the future.

#### Rationale

Individual decision making surrounding food choices is affected by a variety of different factors, such as food preferences, culture, convenience, food preparation skills, marketing/advertising and price. It is however erroneous to assume that individual food choices are solely under an individual's control. Research indicates that the food environment has an important impact on the food choices people make every day; therefore changing individual behavior towards healthier food choices will be very difficult to achieve when the environment in which these decisions are being made is not supportive of healthy food choices.<sup>6,7</sup>

Within the Office of the Chief Medical Officer (OCMOH), as well as other government departments, there are numerous examples of initiatives that clearly support the development of healthy food environments. Examples include:

- the *New Brunswick Wellness Strategy, 2009-2013*;
- the *New Brunswick Public Health Nutrition Framework for Action, 2012-2016*, a joint initiative of the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health and Horizon and Vitalité Health Networks;
- the Department of Education Policy 711: *Healthier Foods and Nutrition in Public Schools*;
- and healthy nutrition policies such Horizon Health Network's *Healthy Meetings and Events* policy and the *Putting Health on the Agenda* model policy which was recommended by the Interdepartmental Deputy Ministers' Committee on Wellness in 2011 for organizing government meetings and events.<sup>8,9,10,11,12,13</sup>

#### Issue

Health-care facilities are seen as important institutions within communities, both in NB and elsewhere. A large number of patients, visitors and family members visit these facilities. New Brunswick's two Regional Health Authorities (RHAs) also employ approximately 20,600 staff and 1,470 physicians. When considering this large employee base and the volume of patients and visitors that pass through RHA facilities every day, it becomes clear that a substantial segment of our population is exposed to the food environment created within these facilities.

Yet, many of these facilities are not leading by example when it comes to promoting healthy lifestyles because the food and beverage options commonly available in these settings contradict the key healthy living messages provided by their own health-care providers and government programs. A healthy health-care organization creates environments for its staff, patients and visitors that are supportive of healthy choices and supports the healthy living messages it promotes to their patients and communities.

<sup>1</sup> Food environment refers to the places (e.g. communities, workplace, home, school, stores, restaurants) and conditions (e.g. geographic access, availability, affordability, marketing, food quality) that influence the food that people acquire.

## Moving forward / Next steps

The OCMOH believes that there is an ethical obligation to provide healthy environments for staff, clients and visitors in health-care facilities. In that light, the Department of Health and the RHAs must work together to ensure that consistent and complementary messages are being provided to New Brunswickers about healthy living in the settings where they live, work, learn and play.

Reducing the incidence of diet-related chronic diseases in New Brunswick is going to require new and innovative thinking with sustained efforts from many stakeholders using a variety of strategies within a variety of settings.

Key steps in the development of a healthy food environment within NB's health-care facilities could include some of the following:

- Garnering clear and strong support from senior leadership within the health system on the importance of developing an environment that supports healthy eating within their facilities, both for their own staff's well-being as well as the numerous patients and visitors who attend these facilities every day.
- Directing concrete action in this area by bringing together a committee/group to work specifically on this issue.
- Developing a comprehensive strategy for improving the food environments within health-care facilities. This strategy should build on existing directives, priorities and partnerships (e.g. Horizon Health Meetings and Events policy, Public Health Nutrition Framework, Wellness Strategy), be based on evidence where applicable, apply multiple approaches (such as education, communication, policy development) and involve relevant stakeholders.

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