
NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Health

NEW B.C. LEGISLATION TO SUPPORT PUBLIC HEALTH ACTION

VICTORIA – Health Minister George Abbott today introduced a new Public Health Act to replace outdated legislation and set the groundwork for a modernization of public health. The new act will tackle global infectious disease, provide stronger tools to address the growing burden of chronic diseases and ensure communities fulfill their role as a partner in treating and housing residents with mental health and addiction challenges.

“British Columbia has been a Canadian leader in addressing public health initiatives, and this modernization of public health legislation provides the province with the tools to best address public health challenges in the 21st Century,” said Abbott. “This legislation brings together all partners – government, individuals and communities – to work together to address public health issues in British Columbia.”

Updates and changes to the legislation provide public health officials with stronger powers to protect the public against communicable diseases such as pandemic influenza or SARS and to deal with health hazards. The changes clarify the roles and responsibilities of public health officials to respond to emergencies, as they help to protect the public from significant harms.

“The role of public health is to protect and promote the health of British Columbians,” said provincial health officer Dr. Perry Kendall. “The new Public Health Act supports our ability to act quickly in the event of public health emergencies like disease outbreaks or natural disasters following best practices set out by the World Health Organization. It will also help us address chronic disease and injury prevention more directly.”

Government’s throne speech commitment to ban the use of trans fats in the preparation of foods in schools, restaurants and food-service establishments by 2010 will occur through legislative changes introduced in the Public Health Act.

“Every step to do away with trans fat from food is worth taking. Doing away with trans fat in the preparation of foods in British Columbia is a good first step,” said Diego Marchese, vice-president of Research and Health Promotion with the Heart & Stroke Foundation. “Scientific evidence shows trans fat significantly increases the risk of heart disease and should be reduced to the lowest level possible.”

Legislative powers created through the Public Health Act will support communities in caring for their own residents, in their own communities. This legislation will enable government to meet the throne speech commitment to require communities to include provisions for mental health and addiction service facilities in their community plans.

“The legislative provision that could require communities to include mental health and addiction service facilities in their community plans is welcome news,” said Bev Gutray, executive director with the Canadian Mental Health Association BC Division. “People with mental health and substance abuse issues live in every community, and it is important that appropriate health services can be provided. CMHA provides over 800 units of housing to people with mental illness throughout the province in approximately 30 communities.”

Public health is the study and practice of managing and improving the health of the whole community rather than the treatment of illness and disability. It focuses on health protection, screening and health promotion.

The provincial health officer is the senior medical health officer for British Columbia and provides independent advice to the Minister of Health, the ministry and the public on public health issues and population health. Each year, the provincial health officer must report publicly, through the Minister of Health to the legislature, on the health of the population.

The new Public Health Act replaces the Health Act, the Venereal Diseases Act and the Public Toilet Act, removing many outdated provisions while strengthening the ministry’s ability to monitor and prevent chronic disease.

2 backgrounder(s) attached.

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