Answering the Wake-up Call: CMA’s Public Health Action Plan

CMA submission to the National Advisory Committee on SARS and Public Health

June 2003

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The public health system is the means by which our community values for the health and well-being of all its members are translated into public policy and action. This system has three key components: surveillance, which monitors the health of populations; the health-care system, which treats disease and promotes health; and public health, which prevents disease and promotes health. The system’s performance was severely tested by the SARS outbreak in Toronto. The CMA is concerned that the public health system, which was largely created in response to that crisis, is in danger of disappearing.

The SARS outbreak in Toronto revealed fundamental weaknesses in our public health system. It highlighted the challenges of communicating with the public about the threat of infection, the need to mobilize resources in a crisis, and the lack of coordination among federal, provincial and municipal governments.

The CMA recommends that the federal government establish a national strategy for public health. This strategy should include:

- A national surveillance system to monitor health trends and identify emerging health threats.
- A national response plan to coordinate the public health response to outbreaks.
- A national communication strategy to provide accurate and timely information to the public.

The CMA also recommends that the federal government invest in the public health system by:

- Increasing funding for public health programs.
- Developing a national public health workforce development program.
- Establishing a national public health research agenda.

The CMA believes that the public health system is essential to helping Canadians live longer, healthier lives. It is a system that is effective only when it is supported by the political will, funding and resources necessary to ensure its long-term survival.