

## DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

### CNA POSITION

The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) endorses a broad approach to supporting health that addresses factors both within and outside the health sector. CNA challenges health-care providers and health system decision-makers to acknowledge the important but limited influence the health system has on health outcomes. Furthermore, CNA calls on policy-makers to make addressing determinants of health<sup>1</sup> a priority for achieving health goals.

CNA believes that registered nurses positively influence the health of individuals and their communities by addressing a broad range of determinants of health encompassing the social and economic environment, the physical environment, and the person's individual characteristics and behaviours. CNA believes that nurses are integral to addressing determinants of health through their individual nursing practice, their collaboration with others inside and outside the health sector, and their participation in promoting healthy public policy.

#### *Redirect funding toward preventing illness and promoting health*

For too long, Canada has funded a health system focused on treating illness as opposed to preventing illness and promoting health. CNA believes there is a paramount need to create a policy paradigm shift to support upstream activities. CNA strongly urges federal, provincial/territorial and municipal governments to redirect health system funding toward preventive health-care services and programs, and services that positively address health. Examples of such programs and services include nutrition education, counseling for pre-diabetic patients, affordable housing, early child development training, improved employment conditions and enhanced food security.

#### *Adopt a collaborative approach toward policies that address health determinants*

CNA endorses a collaborative approach among individuals working in different disciplines and sectors. To support coherence, CNA strongly urges governments to work across departments and levels of government to develop and implement policies and programs to deliver services that address determinants of health.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Strengthen and focus research on health determinants*

CNA recognizes the value of health research in deepening our understanding of the impact of various determinants of health on the health status of individuals and populations. We recommend further research, particularly on the effects of interventions to address determinants of health, and systematic monitoring of health outcomes. CNA believes there

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<sup>1</sup> This position statement purposely intends to address the broad range of determinants of health. This approach is in keeping with that used by the Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], the World Health Organization [WHO] and the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology [SSCSAST]. CNA's statement is not called "Social Determinants of Health" because this phrase is used with different meanings, and in some instances does not refer to the full range of health determinants.

<sup>2</sup> (PHAC, 2007; Butler-Jones, 2008; SSCSAST, 2009).

is a need for improvements in health research infrastructure to support collaboration among researchers working across disciplines and sectors, including nursing. CNA therefore strongly urges federal, provincial and territorial governments to further invest in research, surveillance systems and the promotion of knowledge transfer.<sup>3</sup>

### *Support RNs in addressing health determinants*

Registered nurses include health determinants in their assessments. Nurses analyze how health determinants interact with nursing interventions and act to create healthy outcomes among individuals and communities with whom they work.<sup>4</sup> CNA strongly urges national, provincial and territorial organizations (including professional, regulatory, educational, employer, government and union) to support registered nurses in addressing determinants of health. This may be done by providing nurses with information and education, empowerment and resources.

## **BACKGROUND**

Determinants of health are factors, behaviours and conditions that interrelate to influence health.<sup>5</sup> Health status results from the combined influence of “complex interactions between social and economic factors, the physical environment and individual behavior.”<sup>6</sup> Many of these factors are outside the health sector. Genetics and personal health practices, such as activity and diet, are not the only predictors of whether individuals stay healthy or become ill. Socio-economic and environmental circumstances have at least as much, and often more, influence on health status as do health-care services and personal health behaviours.<sup>7</sup>

As part of its population health approach, the Public Health Agency of Canada recognizes determinants of health to be:<sup>8</sup>

- income and social status
- social support networks
- education and literacy
- employment/working conditions
- social environments
- physical environments
- personal health practices and coping skills
- healthy child development

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<sup>3</sup> (Butler-Jones, 2008.)

<sup>4</sup> (CNA, 2009)

<sup>5</sup> (WHO, 2009b)

<sup>6</sup> (PHAC, 2009)

<sup>7</sup> (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006; WHO, 2008; Lightman, Mitchell, & Wilson, 2008; Raphael, 2008)

<sup>8</sup> (PHAC, 2009)



- biology and genetic endowment
- health services
- gender
- culture

In Canada, health status is tied to socio-economic status.<sup>9</sup> As an individual's socio-economic status improves – through, for example, higher income or education, better housing or working conditions, or improved access to health care or child care – the person's overall health status improves. Canada has many programs and policies that aim to improve socio-economic status. Still, the gap is growing between people with the highest and lowest levels of income. For example, compared with Canadians in general, poverty rates are significantly higher for some children, aboriginal people, recent immigrants and people with disabilities.<sup>10</sup> For Canada's northern people, including First Nations and Inuit, improving employment, housing and access to food, among other factors, is necessary to achieve improvements in health status.<sup>11</sup>

The World Health Organization (WHO) notes that social determinants of health “are mostly responsible for health inequities,” and characterizes social determinants of health as “the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including the health system.”<sup>12</sup>

As a response to concerns about health inequities, WHO established the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH). In the perspective of the commission:

Lack of health care is not the cause of the huge global burden of illness: water-borne diseases are not caused by lack of antibiotics but by dirty water, and by the political, social, and economic forces that fail to make clean water available to all; heart disease is caused not by a lack of coronary care units but by the lives people lead, which are shaped by the environments in which they live; obesity is not caused by moral failure on the part of individuals but by the excess availability of high-fat and high-sugar foods. The main action on social determinants of health must therefore come from outside the health sector.<sup>13</sup>

The CSDH conducted an extensive analysis of the evidence and in its final report recommended three principles of action:

- Improve the conditions of daily life.
- Tackle the inequitable distribution of power, money and resources.
- Measure and understand the problem and assess the impact of action.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> (Butler-Jones, 2008)

<sup>10</sup> (Butler-Jones, 2008)

<sup>11</sup> (UNICEF, 2009; SSCSAST, 2009)

<sup>12</sup> (WHO, 2009a)

<sup>13</sup> (WHO, 2008, p. 35)

<sup>14</sup> (WHO, 2008)



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The World Health Assembly has since issued an urgent call to reduce health inequities through action on the social determinants of health.<sup>15</sup>

As a profession, nurses advocate for social justice. The CNA *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses* supports nurses to act on determinants of health and to bring about change.<sup>16</sup>

## GOING FORWARD

Determinants of health are a foundational element of nursing education and nursing practice. A few examples of how nurses can act on the CSDH's principles through their nursing knowledge and skills are to:

- consider determinants of health in treatment and follow-up plans;
- know what community and health resources are available to clients;
- ensure health promotion programs go beyond lifestyle and behaviour to take determinants of health into account;
- advocate for universal access to basic health programs such as pharmacare; and
- bring awareness to decision-makers of research on the links between socio-economic factors and health.<sup>17</sup>

*Approved by the CNA Board of Directors  
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## References:

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<sup>15</sup> (World Health Assembly, 2009)

<sup>16</sup> (CNA, 2008)

<sup>17</sup> (CNA, 2005)



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**Also see:**

Related CNA online publication:

Determinants of Health fact sheets

Related ICN publication:

*Reducing Environmental and Lifestyle Related Health Hazards* (2007)

**Replaces:**

*Food Safety and Security are Determinants of Health* (2001)

*The Environment is a Determinant of Health* (2000)

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