

## **Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough County-City Health Unit**

*Tuesday, November 10, 2015*

### **Federal Policy as Medicine**

Canadians have elected a new Liberal federal government and now that Cabinet members have been duly appointed, we can expect the work of governance to begin. Embedded within all party platforms, are promises that are made that can contribute to the health of communities. All levels of government have a role to play in creating healthy public policies, and the government of Justin Trudeau is no exception. A quick scan of his pre-election commitments has helped me come up with my own public health wish list and this is what I will be watching for in the next few weeks and months.

So far, so good! The work has already begun and a great place to start was with the re-institution of the mandatory long form census. The long form census, consisting of 61 questions on language, ethnicity, aboriginal ancestry, education, employment, etc. was a critical tool for decision-making on programming and priorities. It was cancelled in 2011 and despite costing more, the substituted voluntary National Household survey saw response rates drop from 93.5% to only 68.6%. Here in Peterborough, response rates were so poor that half of our township-specific data couldn't be used because it was unreliable. Businesses, municipalities and public health agencies all rely on the information gleaned from the census. Congratulations to our new federal government for bringing it back on the day after the new cabinet was sworn in!

Next on my checklist is the suite of fiscal and social policies that would reduce poverty and provide more affordable housing to those who need it. Factors like income, housing, access to early childhood education, school completion and employment are what we call the "social determinants of health" and are very powerful contributors to the wellbeing of our society. For almost every health outcome, whether it is mental health or physical health, poverty is associated with greater levels of illness, higher rates of death, and shorter life expectancies. Promises to invest in affordable housing, increase the incomes of Canadians through tax reform, new benefits, improvements to Employment Insurance so that the precariously employed are covered, creating more jobs for youth through a new Youth Employment Strategy – all these are welcomed and will have benefits in improved health outcomes. As will the promise to come up with a new Health Accord that would help fund the needed changes to keep medical care universal and comprehensive.

Just as important as the above, would be the promises to address climate change. Canada has lagged behind and needs to become more of a leader in protecting the environment and the futures of our children. Without action on this, the rest becomes superfluous.

I will be looking for the introduction of plain packaging for tobacco products, as has been done in Australia. Removing the branding bling from a legal product that kills half of its users, as a way to prevent uptake or augment smoking cessation efforts, would help us address the leading cause of preventable death. The banning of junk food advertisements to children, the elimination of trans-fats and the reduction of sodium in our foods would all be welcomed, as well, and I know that our new

Minister of Health, Dr. Jane Philpott, will know that there is good evidence to move forward with these as promised.

But, in my humble estimation, the biggest task has been given to another colleague of mine, Dr. Carolyn Bennett, and I am confident that she is up for the job. Carolyn has been tasked with the creation of a new relationship with Indigenous Peoples, based on recognition, rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership. That includes the enactment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations, as well as the requirements of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous people living in Canada are long overdue for such a commitment. I wish all of the new cabinet Ministers well, and look forward to opportunities for collaboration and input as our new federal government inherits the reins of power and gets down to the business of creating a brighter, and healthier future, for all.

*681 words*