

# Caring About Healthcare Workers as First Responders: Enhancing Capacity for Gender-Based Support Mechanisms in Emergency Preparedness Planning

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## Background

Canada faces a heightened and urgent need to improve preparedness to manage and mitigate acute infectious disease epidemics. These may be due to natural or deliberate disease transmissions (e.g. SARS, influenza, or CBRN bioterrorism),



Photograph: Health Canada

or accidental, natural or deliberate contamination of food and water supply (e.g. Walkerton ON). The response to any infectious disease CBRN crisis must necessarily involve public health workers as first responders, including nurses, physicians, and personal care workers (PCWs). Adequate training of these

public health first responders is crucial to managing the acute, medium and long-term health, psychological and social impacts of an infectious disease outbreak.

The Naylor Report "Learning from SARS: Renewal of Public Health in Canada" (October 2003) and the Kirby and LeBreton report "Reforming Health Protection and Promotion in Canada: Time to Act" (November 2003), articulated the need for urgent enhancement of Canada's public health infrastructure and the need for better training, integration, and improved emergency responsiveness, particularly in quarantine situations. The 2003 SARS epidemic in particular demonstrated the need for collaborative and coordinated communications from authorities; core infection control curriculum and training for healthcare workers as "first responders"; and better training guidelines and public education for managing and containing infectious diseases in quarantine conditions in hospitals and home settings.

The goal of this project is to mitigate the impact of future CBRN contagion threats by recommending support mechanisms for healthcare workers as first responders, using lessons learned from the SARS outbreaks about psychosocial impact and balancing work performance and family responsibilities.

## Research Objectives

To mitigate the impact of future Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) contagion threats by recommending support mechanisms for healthcare workers as first responders: Applying lessons learned from the Canadian SARS outbreak about psychosocial impacts and determinants of work-family role performance.

### Additional objectives:

- Synthesize a review of existing literature on support mechanisms for healthcare workers as first responders
- Survey public healthcare workers about psychosocial, family and health impacts resulting from their potential or actual involvement as front-line workers responding to outbreaks of infectious, airborne biological agents
- Identify gaps and provide recommendations for enhanced support mechanisms for front line healthcare workers
- Provide a gender analysis of personnel policy to enhance decision-making capacity on support mechanisms for public healthcare workers
- Increase awareness and decision-making capacity amongst policy audiences through active dissemination of the results of the study and facilitated discussion on the dominant issues.

## Methods

The timeline for this research project spans 3.5 years. A variety of methodologies are being utilized across the 4 project modules:

- a) secondary data analysis,
- b) survey development and administration,
- c) gap analysis and development of a risk management framework using focus groups and policy analysis, and
- d) a policy forum for dissemination and consultation with policy makers. Details of each module is provided below.

### Module 1 Review of Literature

Secondary analysis will be used to produce 3 review papers highlighting the following topics:

- Support mechanisms for healthcare workers as first responders
- Lessons learned: Impacts on healthcare workers as first responders involved in SARS and other outbreaks of infectious disease
- Mechanisms for adoption of communication and organizational best practices

### Module 2 Survey of Public Healthcare Workers and the Psychosocial Impacts of Emergency Care

- A survey will be developed and administered to civilian and military nurses and physician assistants across Canada examining the psychosocial, family and health impacts on first responders as a result of their actual or potential involvement as front-line workers responding to outbreaks of infectious, airborne biological agents
- The survey will inform subsequent modules in this project

### Module 3 Risk Assessment, and Analysis of Hospital Employee Support Mechanisms During an Infectious Disease Outbreak

- A framework including recommendations for improving support mechanisms for healthcare workers as first responders will be developed in module 3.
- Data will be collected from focus groups, analysis of hospital and other organizational emergency plans and the survey from module 2 to identify gaps, current risks, and to develop recommendations for personnel policies and organizational support
- Gender analyses will inform recommendations to encourage gender-sensitive personnel policies

### Module 4 Dissemination and Knowledge Transfer to Policy Audiences

- The final component of this project involves hosting a policy forum to provide discussion, interpretation, implications and recommendations as a result of this study.
- Risk communications recommendations derived from the policy workshop and project findings will be developed to influence and shape public health policy in the event of infectious disease outbreaks (eg. CBRN threats)

### Partners:

Women's Health Bureau, Health Canada  
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Canadian Women's Health Network

Dr. Arlene Bierman, Faculty of Nursing,  
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Dr. Nancy Edwards, Faculty of Health Sciences,  
University of Ottawa

Ms. Judith Shamian, Victorian Order of Nurses

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Dr. James Young, Ontario Ministry of Community  
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Ms. Linda Silas, Canadian Federation Nurses Unions

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