



RESOURCE MAPPING OF RURAL HEALTH INFORMATION IN CANADA

A Report Prepared for the Canadian Health Network

by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Centre for Rural and Northern Health Research (CRaNHR), Laurentian University, was commissioned to conduct the research on rural health information, one of the priority topics identified by the Canadian Health Network (CHN) for network mapping.

Defining rural health is difficult because unlike some other topics in the CHN health information website, which tend to be disease- or service-specific, rural health is amorphous in nature and is defined mostly in terms of geography. The definition adopted for this resource mapping project is very broad. We use the term “rural” to refer to regions, communities or populations that are sometimes called “non-urban”, “small town”, “northern” or “remote” and include geographically isolated urban centres that, even though they do not fit the official definitions of rural, are actually more like rural communities in terms of transportation access, economic and labour force characteristics, and availability of services and amenities.

Using this definition of rural, a number of broad areas important to the health promotion of rural Canadians were defined in order to guide the selection of the organizations to be surveyed. As much as possible, the focus has been on service-specific health information not already covered by other resource mapping teams. Through a series of teleconferences with the Expert Panel and by using a modified Delphi technique, 70 organizations were selected for more in-depth interviews. Of these, 56 organizations completed the survey (80% response rate). The following major points emerged:

- The CHN website will be an invaluable tool to help alleviate the information disparity between urban and rural residents. It is therefore imperative that rural health be an integral and well-developed component of the CHN website.
- The surveyed organizations do not make up a coordinated or coherent rural health network. The network can best be described as a series of independent networks. There is a lack of cross-network connections.
- Many of the organizations surveyed identified themselves as having closer bonds with other resource mapping areas than with a rural health network. But this does not diminish their importance in providing rural health information.

- Given the difficulty in defining rural health, many of the organizations surveyed disseminate rural health information without identifying themselves as rural health organizations or their information as rural health information.
- The key organizations for information provision vary depending upon the type of information being sought. In some areas it was impossible to identify a key organization.
- While abundant information is available in some areas, it is difficult to find relevant information in others.
- Until recently, there have been no central nodes to coordinate the efforts of those in the rural health area. However, this situation is beginning to change with a number of new initiatives that will help integrate and strengthen the rural health network.
- Rural in the context of this project has been defined very broadly and thus overlaps with many of the other topic areas already on the CHN website. It is, therefore, important for the CHN to remind individuals looking for health information on its website to link to other relevant topic areas.
- Few clear trends have emerged from the data due to the diversity of the survey respondents.
- Access to health care resources such as physicians was the number one issue raised by both health consumers and health intermediaries in relation to rural health, but access information is not part of this project.
- An organization needs to be appointed by the CHN to carry this work forward. The organization chosen to further the work of rural health information mapping should have national status, expertise in rural health research, information gathering and analysis capability, experience in information dissemination particularly via the internet and contacts with rural health organizations across the country.
- All of the key organizations identified through this rural health information resource mapping exercise should appear on the CHN website.