

Citizen Engagement in Policy Development and Priority-setting:

The Health Products and Food Branch Public Advisory Committee

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Origins and Rationale

The mandate of the Health Products and Food Branch (HPFB) of Health Canada is to take an integrated approach to the management of the health-related risks and benefits of health products and food. The Branch works to minimize health risk factors to Canadians and maximize the safety provided by the regulatory system for health products and food. It promotes conditions that enable Canadians to make healthy choices and provides information so they can make informed decisions about their health.

Health-related issues, by their very nature, often require public knowledge and participation so people can play an effective role in managing health risks and have more control over their health. In recent years, there has been a growing demand from citizens for greater involvement in decision-making on issues related to health products and food. In 2000, the Office of Consumer and Public Involvement (OCAPI) was established in HPFB to provide information and opportunities for Canadians to become meaningfully involved in the Branch's decision-making processes regarding priorities, policies and programs.

One mechanism developed to increase public involvement in policy development was the Public Advisory Committee (PAC). PAC is an innovative forum that provides advice from the consumer's perspective on issues and initiatives as requested by HPFB. Its mandate is:

- to provide the Assistant Deputy Minister and the Branch Executive Committee with advice from the consumer/public perspective on issues and initiatives as requested by the Branch;
- to provide guidance to OCAPI and HPFB relating to planning and management of consumer/public involvement activities; and
- to provide advice on how to increase the effectiveness of OCAPI and HPFB communications and information dissemination to consumers/the public.

From Health Canada's perspective, PAC is unique in that it provides advice from the individual consumer perspective. There are other advisory committees that provide feedback to the Branch on broad strategic and management issues, such as the Advisory Committee on Management, but PAC is unique in that it is made up of ordinary citizens rather than experts or representatives of stakeholder groups. Its members provide their perspectives as individual consumers and citizens, not as representatives of particular groups.

Nominations for committee membership were sought from each province and territory in Canada through newspaper announcements, a mail-out campaign and website postings. More than 150 potential candidates were considered in a rigorous selection and review process.

Members were confirmed by the Deputy Minister of Health Canada, and PAC held its first meeting in November 2002.

PAC in Action

PAC reports directly to the Assistant Deputy Minister of HPFB. The Director General of OCAPI acts as Executive Secretary for the committee and OCAPI staff provide secretariat support. OCAPI is responsible for ensuring that issues of importance to the Branch are brought to PAC, that its advice is taken into consideration, and that responses and follow-up actions are brought to its attention.

Up to 20 individuals may be members of PAC at any one time. Members are appointed for a term of two or three years, which may be extended for an additional term to a maximum period of six consecutive years. Currently, PAC is composed of 17 members of the public from across Canada, including men and women of various ages, educational backgrounds, occupations, cultures and linguistic backgrounds. For example, members include a primary school teacher, a physician, a homeopathic clinician, an Aboriginal policy analyst, a university student, a college professor, and a number of urban and rural community volunteers. The cross-sectoral diversity of PAC membership is intended to help HPFB keep abreast of the needs and views of Canadians.

PAC meets for a two-day period, three times per year. Since PAC members represent Canadians from a variety of regions and cultural backgrounds, at least one meeting each year is held outside of Ottawa, the nation's capital.

Both of Canada's official languages (French and English) are used and simultaneous translation is provided. The minutes of each meeting and the Committee's annual report are posted on the OCAPI website, after approval by the Assistant Deputy Minister and the Chair of PAC. Individual PAC members also participate in other HPFB consultations throughout the year, and brief the committee on those experiences.

There are a number of innovative aspects to PAC. For example, PAC members are provided with ongoing opportunities for continuous learning regarding the work of the Branch. Recently, in May 2004, PAC members had the opportunity to visit Health Canada laboratories such as the the Pharmaceutical Microbiology and Chemistry Laboratories. Members of the committee appreciated their first hand opportunity to view the work taking place in these laboratories. The OCAPI secretariat continues to work with the Committee to ensure that ongoing opportunities for learning are provided to members. Work is also taking place regarding how an effective ongoing orientation / training program might be implemented. This is particularly important since in the longer term, there will be some rotation in membership with new individuals joining the Committee.

The PAC Terms of Reference clearly state that "discussion during meetings will be open, frank and free-flowing" and "all members of the Committee will have equal status during discussion". After the first few meetings, it was decided to bring in an outside facilitator with strong process skills. The facilitator works with HPFB program staff well in advance of each PAC meeting to clarify expectations and suggest processes that will help the committee provide focused, useful input.

Another innovative aspect of the PAC is with regard to the emphasis that is placed on using dialogue-based processes which generate rather than simply channel discussion. These processes seek to encourage open discussion, acknowledge the emotional and cultural components of issues, surface underlying assumptions, and stimulate creative thinking. The attention to process and facilitation has helped to ensure that the committee's deliberations are free-flowing yet informed and focused.

The attention to preparation extends to the background documentation. PAC members are provided with comprehensive binders of information at least two weeks prior to each meeting.

Considerable attention is also given to evaluation and continuous improvement. After each meeting, PAC members fill out evaluation forms. They indicate the extent to which the objective and expected results of the session were clear, the briefing notes and documentation were useful and the consultation processes enabled them to express their views. They provide feedback on whether the Branch did a satisfactory job of explaining how PAC input would be used and whether the Branch demonstrated a clear commitment to ensuring that PAC advice would be used.

The HPFB personnel who have consulted PAC also complete evaluation forms after the meetings, indicating the messages they heard from PAC, the extent to which this feedback met their objectives, what was new or different about the advice they received from PAC, and how they intend to use the feedback. They are also asked if they would consult PAC again in the future and, if so, what they would do differently to prepare for the consultation.

The PAC secretariat prepares a report after each meeting summarizing the feedback from the committee and program staff. The Executive Secretary presents this information to the Branch Executive Committee. Also presented are any suggestions from PAC members and Branch staff regarding future topics for consultations. The purpose of PAC is to provide input on issues of interest to the Branch, but consideration is also given to issues raised by committee members. The Assistant Deputy Minister and Branch Executive Committee make the final decision about topics; generally, no more than three topics are considered in one PAC meeting.

PAC is innovative in that it provides a mechanism for longer-term involvement of citizens in the policy-making process. Citizens can provide ongoing feedback on issues over several years as these issues move through the policy process. Committee members have an opportunity to build their knowledge and understanding of the Branch and the issues it faces, and thus can provide informed advice from a citizen's perspective.

Issues and Initiatives

PAC has advised HPFB on integrated planning, strategic directions and broad concepts, as well as on policy aspects of issues such as biotechnology, animal livestock cloning for food use, and plant molecular farming¹. Its input has enriched Branch policy-making in a number of ways. For example:

¹ Plant molecular farming involves using genetically modified plants to produce substances that the plants typically do not produce naturally, such as industrial compounds or therapeutics.

- PAC was asked to provide advice on basic principles and concepts that should be considered in comprehensive definitions of transparency and openness. Its input helped to shape the definitions of operating principles that are now included in the HPFB Public Involvement Framework.
- After receiving feedback from PAC on public concerns about animal livestock cloning for food use, HPFB decided to develop a short public communication document about the issue. PAC will be asked to review and provide comments on this document.
- The draft Health Canada Framework on Biotechnology has been revised to reflect suggestions from PAC (e.g., clarifying ethical and social issues and increasing the emphasis on health and safety) and a separate document produced for the public.
- PAC's advice regarding a regulatory approach to plant molecular farming was presented at a Health Canada workshop on the topic. This workshop was the next step in the department's policy-making process on this issue.

PAC has also provided advice on the planning and management of public involvement activities around issues such as food irradiation, health protection and legislative renewal. It has also been consulted on communication plans and materials dealing with issues such as risk communication and drug safety information. Its feedback has helped strengthen public communication materials on complex issues.

Risks and Challenges

Any new approach to citizen engagement involves risks and challenges, and PAC was no exception. It is a new type of committee for HPFB – composed of citizens rather than experts – and this has entailed new ways of working. The PAC secretariat and the facilitator have put considerable effort into developing tools and processes to help Branch staff clarify their consultation needs and present complex issues in a format suitable for non-experts. For example, prior to consultations, program staff are asked to fill out a form (called a briefing note) to indicate precisely what kind of input they are seeking from PAC (information, advice, or decision) and in what form they would like the input (individual feedback, common understanding, or consensus).

A risk common to many citizen engagement exercises is that the value of the exercise is not always visible in the short term, because policy development is a long-term process. It is important to demonstrate that the resources invested in the activity are generating value. The PAC secretariat addresses this concern through regular feedback to management and staff on the outcomes and benefits of PAC consultations, and a commitment to evaluation and continuous improvement. The obvious dedication of PAC members and the quality of advice provided have underscored the value of the committee.

Many citizens are more accustomed to models of consultation based on representation and advocacy, so there is always a risk that citizens may seek to use PAC to lobby on particular issues. This risk has been managed by the demanding selection process, clear mandate and terms of reference, and ongoing attention to effective facilitation and processes.

The variety of citizen viewpoints in the broad population presents another challenge. Clearly, a committee of 17 people cannot represent all views, but is important to involve a variety of informed, interested citizens and to strive to obtain good representation of the

spectrum of viewpoints. The selection process for PAC took into account regional diversity as well as age, gender, education, occupation and cultural diversity. In addition, the committee's terms of reference specify that members must demonstrate communication with and input from the public, so that their individual views are informed to a certain extent by a broader understanding of the public's views.

Benefits

PAC has been a valuable mechanism for HPFB to obtain citizen input on a variety of issues and initiatives. Managers and program staff have found PAC consultations to be highly fruitful, noting in evaluations that PAC provides fresh, unprompted, "out of the box" ideas, is able to focus on the big picture and accomplishes a lot in a short time; that PAC questions and reflections have added many new perspectives and improved specific communications materials; and that PAC provides an effective way to get citizen input into long-term strategy and policy development.

Unlike many "one off" or short-term public involvement initiatives, PAC provides a mechanism for ongoing citizen input. Policies and strategies can be brought back to the committee for review and input at various stages in their development.

From the citizen point of view, PAC provides an opportunity for in-depth input into policies, strategies and programs at a stage in the development process when the input can effectively be taken into account. The support provided by the secretariat enables citizens to comment constructively on complex issues.

Lessons Learned

A key lesson is the importance of preparation. HPFB has learned to treat each PAC meeting like a citizen consultation, not simply a committee meeting. In a citizen consultation, a base of knowledge about an issue cannot be assumed: clear briefing material must be provided well in advance, and introductory presentations should be short and focused on the issue to be addressed. Considerable advance planning is needed to ensure that all materials are produced in both official languages in the required time frame.

It is also critical to be very clear about what kind of input the citizens are supposed to provide: vague requests for feedback will lead to frustration on all sides. PAC has taken its role seriously and challenged HPFB managers to be specific about what they want from it. The facilitator and secretariat staff invest considerable time in working with program staff before each consultation so that objectives are clear and all parties understand what results are expected.

Advance planning is particularly critical when the purpose of the citizen committee is to provide advice on strategic horizontal priorities. It takes effort to maintain discussions at a strategic level, and once a citizen advisory committee exists it may be tempting to use it to review all sorts of programs and information materials. It is important to make the best use of the committee, and the resources invested in it, by taking a strategic approach to consultation. Goals and agendas for the meetings need to be established well in advance, with senior management involvement.

The experience with PAC suggests that creative processes that encourage dialogue will generate more effective input. At the same time, processes must be carefully designed, and facilitation must be strong, to ensure that discussions don't wander off track. Citizens don't want to waste their time, and governments don't want to waste resources. Investing time in preparation and process design is well worthwhile.

A citizen committee needs time to deliberate and reach conclusions, so it is best to limit the number of issues to be considered at any one meeting. When consulting on complex science-based issues, it is also critical that background materials be written in plain language. It is helpful to use case studies and scenarios to illustrate theoretical concepts.

A vital lesson is the importance of using the input from the citizens' committee and of providing formal feedback to the committee on how its input was used. OCAPI provides regular feedback to PAC, and PAC members continue to note their desire to know whether and how their input is used. Citizens want to know that their voices are being heard. Mechanisms for providing this feedback should be explicitly built into a citizen engagement exercise, to ensure that it is provided regularly and not simply on an *ad hoc* basis.

Looking to the Future

PAC provides a unique forum to obtain citizen input on strategic horizontal branch priorities. It can provide useful input on specific topics, and has done so, but its real value is as a mechanism to obtain citizen input on strategic directions and priorities. As the committee members have gained experience, and as a more systematic approach has been taken to the consultations, this has become increasingly evident. An important priority for the future is to maintain and build on this strategic approach.

HPFB and PAC are now beginning to deal with issues of committee membership renewal, such as how to bring in new members and fresh perspectives while ensuring that the experience developed by the committee is not lost. PAC has become an important voice for citizens in the policy process, characterized by a commitment to experimentation and openness on the part of government and citizens. This shared commitment to innovation will continue to underpin the committee's work in the future.

Contact

For more information, contact Shari Silber at 1-613-954-7434 or visit the HPFB Public Advisory Committee website at http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/ocapi-bpcp/public_adv_com_e.html

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Shari Silber is a Senior Public Involvement Officer with the Office of Consumer and Public Involvement. She has extensive experience developing public involvement strategies for various initiatives within the Health Products and Food Branch of Health Canada, and has more recently played a key role in designing consultations for Health Canada's Health Products and Food Branch Public Advisory Committee. Ms. Silber also led a series of consultations on Advertising of Health Products as part of Health Canada's Health Protection Legislative Renewal Initiative. Throughout 2004, she managed a new initiative in the Branch on public involvement performance reporting. Ms Silber holds a B.A Psychology from McGill University, Montreal and a Master of Library and Information Science also from McGill University.

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Sylvie Cantin is Director of Public Involvement. In this role, she established and maintained relationships with various organizations representing patients and consumers and facilitated their participation to the development of policies. She coordinates public involvement activities in the Health Products and Food Branch and issues quarterly reports on past and planned activities. Ms. Cantin develops and maintains suitable processes, systems and tools for effective and efficient public involvement in the Branch. She coordinates the Secretariat for the Public Advisory Committee and also co-chairs the Strategic Advisory Committee for the VOICE project - Voluntary Organizations Involved in Collaborative Engagement in health policy. Ms. Cantin is a graduate of the University of Ottawa with a Master's degree in Mathematics and two Bachelors degrees in Statistics and Sociology.

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