



Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation

Web-based Survey Results

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Introduction

The NSHRF is updating its health research priorities. The objective of this initiative is to maximize the impact of the health research enterprise on informed decision making through the focused and efficient use of NSHRF resources. The research priorities process has four phases: Process Identification and Information Gathering, Consultations, Priority Identification, Priority Implementation. This process is designed to be inclusive, respectful, fair, and transparent in order to respect the diversity of constituents that the NSHRF serves.

As part of the Information Gathering phase a number of background documents were prepared. These documents were considered "living documents" and were posted on the NSHRF website as they were completed for information, feedback, input and suggestions. If readers felt that information was missing, incorrect or misrepresented from any of the background documents, or the process, they had the opportunity to the NSHRF for consideration as priorities are established.

The Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation (NSHRF) was created by the Health Research Foundation Act and is required under this act to foster health research throughout the province by assisting, collaborating with and funding individuals and organizations conducting health research. According to its legislated mandate the NSHRF must support research that is consistent with the priorities identified by health boards, government, institutions and individuals. In support of an upcoming process to identify new research priorities, NSHRF deployed a web-based survey with the objective of having health research and health system partners provide feedback and input to help further inform the process. 265 complete responses were received from a diverse group including researchers, government staff, DHA staff, community organizations and business. This report highlights the thematic feedback received.

This report is intended to present the theme that emerged in relation to health research priorities. Operational suggestions will be considered by the NSHRF as programs are reevaluated based on priorities established by the Foundation's Board of Directors.

Methodology

The survey was intended to provide a broad group of the NSHRF's stakeholders with an opportunity to provide input in the priority setting process by gathering feedback on information collected to date as well as solicit further information from respondents with diverse perspectives related to health research and the health system. Responses were solicited in the following areas:

- The respondent's role within the health system
- Challenges related to infrastructure to conduct and use research in the province

- Validation of the six major health issues identified in the document “Major Health Issues in Nova Scotia: *An Environmental Scan*”
- Identify how evidence is used in decision-making processes within the provincial government and District Health Authorities
- To gauge perceptions regarding the amount of evidence available to make decisions within the health system

The survey was made available from October 2 – November 4, 2009. The survey was distributed through the NSHRF e-mail distribution list, NSHRF’s e-news which is distributed to over 250 people across the province, email updates sent to consultation participants and an invitation was added to all NSHRF staff’s signature line.

Who Completed the Survey

264 of the 265 respondents specified their role in health or health research system. The breakdown is as follows:

Role in the Health System	Percentage
Licensed health care professional	9%
Researcher with academic appointment	23%
Staff of community organizations	4%
Government employee	57%
DHA employee	4%
Student	3%

The Research Enterprise in Nova Scotia

This section was to help the NSHRF priorities consultation team gauge health system partners’ perceptions of the level of funding available for health research in the province as well as to seek feedback on what are the challenges in research infrastructure.

Respondents were asked what amount of research is funded by public bodies (whether federal or provincial) is available within the province. Responses were as follows:

\$0-10 million	35%
\$11-20 million	32%
\$21-30 million	20%
\$31-40 million	8%
\$41-50 million	6%

There was no significant difference among the groups (Government, District Health Authorities, and Community) with the exception of the research community, the majority of whom indicated they believed that between \$11 and \$30 million was being spent on competitive, publically-funded health research compared to the majority of other respondents who believed it was between \$0 and \$10 million.

Infrastructure Support

When asked if there was adequate infrastructure to support health research in Nova Scotia, 66% of respondents indicated that there is not enough support for research infrastructure. This number was consistent among all groups.

Follow-up questions were asked regarding what kinds of support were needed to support health research infrastructure in Nova Scotia. Given the breadth of perspectives from health researchers and stakeholders from the health system, a number of specific examples were provided where infrastructure support was needed and where NSHRF could provide support to address these needs. Upon further analyses of these examples, common themes arose that include:

- Lack of physical space:
- Personnel
- Funding
- Collaboration
- Conducting Applied Health Research

Below is a brief synopsis of what was shared in relation to these themes.

Lack of physical space – Physical space to conduct research is extremely limited. There were numerous examples provided of successful research programs that have struggled to find appropriate laboratory space and physical space to situate employees related to specific research projects. This is proving to be increasingly difficult to address as space is not readily available and there is little investment in new structures.

Personnel – Personnel that support researchers are difficult to attract and retain given that their employment is often cyclical and only for the duration of a funded project. Capacity is often built in staff to manage grants, write research proposals and oversee projects and in turn they are recruited to larger organizations that provide more stable job opportunities. Also, there was mention by some respondents that recruiting and retaining new researchers and young investigators is an important issue not to be overlooked.

Funding – Funding continues to be a challenge in the province and increased funding opportunities are needed to address infrastructure challenges. Feedback was also provided that accountability is an important concept to address and that it should be

clearly demonstrated how increased dollars are spent and what benefits are realized for the investment in health research.

Collaboration – There are challenges in building collaborative efforts that would support the development of teams (i.e. interdisciplinary research teams) including time, financial resources, and the sometimes insular nature of various sectors such as government, academic researchers and clinicians who may be more comfortable working within their own sectors.

Conducting Applied Health Research – The use of evidence and the ability to conduct applied health research are confounded by things like complex mixed-methodologies that may not be appreciated by the wider research community. Engaging in multidisciplinary teams, ethical consideration of these types of mixed-methodology studies and funding were cited as other challenges to conducting applied health research in Nova Scotia.

Major Health Issues in Nova Scotia

As part of the priority setting process, the NSHRF commissioned an environmental scan (“Major Health Issues in Nova Scotia: An Environmental Scan”) that used epidemiological data to determine major health issues facing Nova Scotians. The major issues identified in that scan are as follows:

- **Reducing health disparities.** Health disparities are significant health challenges that differ among populations based on factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. This may include things like food insecurity, lack of access to culturally appropriate health services, or poor health literacy.
- **Integrated disease and injury prevention.** This includes reducing the risk of disease and injury through mechanisms such as increasing physical activity, promoting healthy eating and wearing helmets for riding bicycles.
- **Chronic disease management.** This includes the management of diseases that are rarely cured completely, over a long period of time. This includes conditions such as diabetes, congestive heart failure, cancer, and asthma, etc.
- **Re-orienting the health system to emphasize primary health care.** Primary health care services are often the first point of contact with the health system and are provided to promote health, prevent illness and treat people when they are ill.

- **Implementing sustainable continuing care models.** Continuing care is often longer-term in nature and is provided to people in a variety of settings including hospitals, long-term care facilities (nursing home) or in their own home.
- **Implementing best practices in recruitment, retention, role sharing and change among health human resources.** Health human resources are those human resources required to staff the health system.

It is important to note that the Environmental Scan identified these issues at a systems level and was not intended to provide an in-depth picture of specific health status or health systems issues. Respondents were first asked to indicate whether they felt these issues, based on their experience working in health research or the health system, were reflective of the issue facing Nova Scotians. 52% of respondents agreed that these issues reflected the health issues that are faced by Nova Scotians, while 48 % felt that it did not reflect the health issues.

Most of those (85%) that did not feel that these six issues were the major health issues that were of significant concern. When these examples were analyzed most of them were found to relate to the issues identified in the scan.

When analyzing the 48% of responses that indicated they did not agree that these issues reflected are of concern for Nova Scotians, 85% of these responses provide specific examples of health issues they felt were not captured in the six major themes but further analysis indicate that they relate back to the six identified in the Scan.

Detailed analysis of the respondent generated health issues was challenging, as many were interlinked (for example mental health and addictions; literacy and poverty). However, two major themes emerged from the feedback provided related to the major health issues facing Nova Scotians and they can be identified in 2 streams: (1) addressing health disparities and (2) addressing health system issues.

Addressing health disparities had several prevalent themes that arose. Mental health and associated disparities such as addictions, literacy and poverty as well as access to mental health services is clearly a theme. Another issue that was prevalent throughout responses was having research that addresses knowledge gaps within specific populations or communities. This would include addressing issues within specific groups such as African Nova Scotians, seniors, and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered individuals.

The most prevalent subjects mentioned within examining health system challenges were utilizing evidence to better inform decision-making processes, addressing both current and impending health human resource challenges within a number of different disciplines, and addressing wait times.

Using Evidence to Inform the Decision-Making Process

As part of the survey stakeholders were asked about the availability and applicability of research in health systems and health promotion as well as data to support informed decision-making. This series of questions generally had a response rate of just over 50%. The following provides a high-level analysis of the themes that were identified.

In regards to the health system, research survey respondents overwhelmingly felt there was evidence that could be used, however what was needed was more support for implementation science studies to better understand how decision-makers and researchers can work together to contextualize and utilize evidence. Again, respondents highlighted the concept of a health policy research centre as a potential mechanism to generate new knowledge and contextualize current evidence to support decision-makers in Nova Scotia and build effective collaborations.

The next area respondents were asked about is health promotion research and its availability and adaptability in a Nova Scotia context. The majority of people agreed that there is evidence available but the challenge is contextualizing it for Nova Scotia and synthesizing what is an often overwhelming body of information. The feedback for this question was very broad, often with specific examples of how NSHRF could achieve this, but thematically the need to have collaborative efforts to address health disparities in research was evident as well as the need to better understand how to utilize evidence. Again, respondents indicated support for a health policy research centre would address the core issues that result in health disparities.

Within the next series of questions, we tried to ascertain the level of access people have to research within their various institutions and what tools and/or mechanisms would support the utilization of research within their work. The majority of respondents indicated that they do not have adequate access to peer-reviewed research. Interestingly, in the comments, many people indicated that they felt the evidence was there to be utilized but there are challenges accessing the breadth of information that is available and synthesizing it (with mechanisms such as a systematic reviews) making it difficult to utilize. They also felt more centralized library services would be helpful to support those within District Health Authorities to make informed decisions.

One of the other areas proves to be a challenge for informed decision-making in the province is data. When asked if the availability and accessibility of data (such as epidemiological data) was an issue for decision makers, few people indicated that access to data was an issue. The majority of these respondents indicated there is availability of data from sources such as Community Counts, the Population Health Research Unit at Dalhousie and Statistics Canada. What was indicated is that these sources are disparate and having a central access point would increase accessibility and applicability. It was

suggested that having points of collection for data would be helpful in ensuring that this information is readily available.

The Role of the NSHRF

In the final part of the survey, respondents were asked specifically what they see the Foundation's role in informed decision-making and what priorities our Board should consider in the decision-making process. Again, NSHRF was seen by respondents as having a catalyst role to support the health system in its decision-making process by facilitating the use of evidence. It is also important to note that although a number of comments indicated the need to focus on population health research, it was noted that the NSHRF should not lose its role as a research funder and that it is important to fund basic science as well as population health research.

Conclusions

There is considerable support for the research enterprise in Nova Scotia although there are opportunities to continue raising awareness about the amount invested in health research in Nova Scotia and the contribution of health research to the health system. One of the major issues needing to be addressed is the dwindling infrastructure support that directly impacts the research enterprise. This includes addressing the support to ensure support personnel are recruited and retained, physical space is available to conduct research and working with partners to ensure that adequate funding to support collaborative and applied health research is available to the research community in Nova Scotia.

Health issues identified by the majority of respondents within the health system relate back to the six issues that were identified epidemiological data. These are:

- Reducing health disparities
- Integrated disease and injury prevention
- Chronic disease management
- Re-orienting the health system to emphasize primary health care
- Implementing sustainable continuing care models
- Implementing best practices in recruitment, retention, role sharing and change among health human resources

Upon preliminary analysis it did not appear that the majority of respondents felt that these systems level issues were accurate, but further analysis indicated that the more specific issues identified in the survey were in keeping with the overall systems level themes.

There was significant feedback provided by respondents that they feel the NSHRF has a role in supporting decision-makers within the provincial health system by linking them

with the evidence. The need for a centralized data repository that collects easily accessible and relevant data was a theme throughout the responses. Additionally, many respondents felt there was research available in the areas of health promotion and health systems that could be applied to the work that they do but they are unsure as to how to contextualize or utilize this research.

Overall respondents provided a wealth of information about how the health research enterprise in Nova Scotia could be better supported and how to leverage what resources we have to better utilize health research. It is clear that although there is work to be done to better support the generation of new knowledge and use of already existing knowledge, the health research enterprise is seen as having an essential role in Nova Scotia.