Active Canada 20/20: A physical activity plan for Canada

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ABSTRACT

Physical inactivity is a pressing public health concern. In this commentary we argue that Canada's approach to increasing physical activity (PA) has been fragmented and has lacked coordination, funding and a strategic approach. We then describe a potential solution in Active Canada 20/20 (AC 20/20), which provides both a national plan and a commitment to action from non-government and public sectors with a view to engaging corporate Canada and the general public. It outlines a road map for initiating, coordinating and implementing proactive initiatives to address this prominent health risk factor. The identified actions are based on the best available evidence and have been endorsed by the majority of representatives in the relevant sectors. The next crucial steps are to engage all those involved in public health promotion, service provision and advocacy at the municipal, provincial and national levels in order to incorporate AC 20/20 principles into practice and planning and thus increase the PA level of every person in Canada. Further, governments, as well as the private, not-for-profit and philanthropic sectors, should demonstrate leadership and continue their efforts toward providing the substantial and sustained resources needed to recalibrate Canadians' habitual PA patterns; this will ultimately improve the overall health of our citizens.

KEY WORDS: Policy; exercise; sports

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Population levels of physical activity (PA) have decreased, and sedentary behaviours have increased in most developed countries over the past 50 to 70 years.^{1–3} Physical inactivity is now identified by the World Health Organization as the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality,⁴ and the vast majority of Canadian adults⁵ and children^{6,7} do not meet minimum guidelines for PA. The solution to such widespread unhealthy lifestyle behaviours does not rest solely on individual-level interventions or programs promoting leisure-time PA;⁸ policy and environmental approaches are also essential.^{9–11} For instance, the *Toronto Charter for Physical Activity*¹² calls for the implementation of robust national policies and action plans that support PA.

Such national policies, plans or strategies can provide direction, support and coordination of the many sectors and stakeholders involved through the establishment of common objectives and strategies, and the negotiation of roles and responsibilities (i.e., an action plan). These describe the procedures of institutions in the government, non-government and private sectors to promote PA in the population.¹³ The development of a policy should also allow greater allocation of resources and greater accountability, and it would be a significant indicator of political commitment. To be effective, such policies and plans should recommend a combination of strategies to affect multiple levels of influence (e.g., individual, organizational), incorporate evidence-based guidelines on PA and health, provide an implementation plan and obtain support from a broad range of relevant stakeholders.¹² National policies, plans or strategies have been developed and implemented in countries across the world (e.g., Australia, the US).^{14,15} Though Canada has a long history of policy initiatives addressing physical fitness, active living and sport,¹⁶ a recent

assessment of the current policy context determined these were “inadequate to increase population PA”.¹⁷ In spite of efforts such as the Integrated Pan-Canadian Healthy Living Strategy,¹⁸ which was driven by concerns about rising obesity rates in the mid-1990s, Canada's approach to increasing PA has been under-resourced¹⁷ and has lacked the coordination and strategic approach required for population-wide interventions that link evidence to action.^{19–21} For instance, the most recent version of Canadian physical guidelines was funded and produced with minimal support, involvement or leadership from the federal government.²²

A call to action and plan for Canada: Active Canada 20/20

In the absence of demonstrable leadership, the PA sector responded with a collective call to action and identified the need for a coordinated approach to address physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour in Canada. The result of their efforts was a document entitled *Active Canada 20/20, A Physical Activity*

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Strategy and Change Agenda for Canada.²³ As its development has not been led by or endorsed by government at the federal level to date, Active Canada 20/20 (AC 20/20) is not a formal or national policy but, rather, an action plan or strategy. It is designed to engage decision-makers and rally the collaborative, coordinated and consistent efforts of all stakeholders at every level to reverse the decline in population PA levels and the rise in sedentary behaviours that have taken place over recent generations, and to create a “culture of an active nation”. It provides a vision for an active Canada, focuses on high-priority actions and needed investments, builds on current strengths, identifies strategies to address gaps, and provides focus and opportunity for coordinated action. AC 20/20 is intended to support and guide the work of stakeholders at the local, regional, provincial/territorial and federal levels. Provinces and territories may also choose to use AC 20/20 as a basis for developing their own plan appropriate to their own context and priorities.

Development of Active Canada 20/20

Grounded in the 2010 *Toronto Charter for Physical Activity*,¹² the *Pan-Canadian Physical Activity Strategy*²⁴ developed by the Coalition for Active Living in 2003 and a number of Canadian and international evidence-based PA strategies, an AC 20/20 consultation document was prepared in 2011 that incorporated recommendations for bridging the research, policy and practice components to collectively achieve the vision of an active Canada (see Table 1 for a timeline of the development of AC 20/20). This process was initiated by the advisory groups of ParticipACTION (www.participaction.com), which serve as a voice of PA and sport participation in Canada.²⁵ The plan was developed around a framework consisting of four Areas of Focus (Policy Development, Change and Implementation; Targeted Information and Public Education; High Quality, Accessible Programs and Services; Community Design); three Foundations for Change (Evidence and Knowledge Exchange; Strategic Investments; Mobilization); and a series of strategic and priority actions that are mutually reinforcing and work together to achieve the AC 20/20 objectives (see Figure 1). The Foundations

provide essential support to the Areas of Focus, which in turn provide the major thrusts of a change agenda to make Canada a more physically active country. No one Area of Focus can be addressed in isolation, and each is essential to building an active Canada.

The consultation document was used to support a national consultation through an online survey and a series of in-person consultations held from September 2011 to January 2012. Over 850 respondents completed the online survey along with another 450 respondents specifically from the Aboriginal community. Participants originated from every province and territory in Canada and represented multiple sectors (e.g., recreation, sport, government, health care professionals). In total, approximately 1,700 stakeholders provided input and feedback that informed the final version of AC 20/20.²³ The resulting document was supported by members of the Interprovincial Sport and Recreation Council and was presented to federal/provincial/territorial (F/P/T) ministers responsible for sport, physical activity and recreation in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, in June 2012. Ministers accepted the document and encouraged the sector to continue its efforts to fine-tune AC 20/20 in relation to initiatives in the sport and recreation sectors. At their most recent meeting in Prince George, British Columbia (BC), in February 2015 the ministers called for a review of AC 20/20 “with a view to developing a pan-Canadian framework to be brought to Ministers for endorsement at a future meeting”.²⁶

Implementing Active Canada 20/20

The first step toward implementing the plan was to convene a two-day National Gathering in Fredericton, New Brunswick, in May 2013 with 100 delegates from across Canada in attendance. The invited delegates comprised representatives from every province and territory and from a variety of sectors (e.g., PA, sport, recreation, public health, government), as well as 20 national non-government organizations (NGOs). The primary objectives of the Gathering were to create momentum in the country for the aligned and collaborative implementation of AC 20/20 by key stakeholders and to identify national priorities for collective

Table 1. Active Canada 20/20 timeline

2010, February	ParticipACTION's Policy and Capacity Building Advisory Group identifies gaps and decides to develop a sector-wide national physical activity framework/strategy.
2011, February	Active Canada 20/20 Steering Committee established.
2011, June	Draft Active Canada 20/20 Strategy presented to members of ParticipACTION's advisory groups.
2011	Steering Committee fine-tunes Active Canada 20/20 Strategy and develops Consultation Strategy.
2011, July	Domain name purchased and website developed.
2011, July	Stakeholders engaged in national online survey (683 responses).
2011–2012	Stakeholders engaged in face-to-face consultation sessions in 12 out of 13 provinces and territories (Sept 2011 – Jan 2012).
2011, October	National online survey: Aboriginal stakeholders (approx. 450 responses).
2012, January	Finalized Active Canada 20/20 Strategy document.
2012, February	Presented to federal/provincial/territorial (F/P/T) deputy ministers responsible for sport, physical activity and recreation.
2012, January & February	Presented Active Canada 20/20 Strategy and consultation results: Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) Summit; 4th Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada (CDPAC) Conference.
2012, June	Presented Active Canada 20/20 Strategy document to F/P/T ministers responsible for sport, physical activity and recreation, Inuvik, Northwest Territories.
2013, February	Development of an evaluation framework through the leadership of the ParticipACTION Research Advisory Committee.
2013, May	A two-day National Gathering was held in Fredericton, New Brunswick, to create momentum in the country for collaborative implementation of Active Canada 20/20.
2013, May; ongoing	Action groups established to coordinate efforts in four priority areas identified at the National Gathering: Active Transportation; Inclusion/Accessibility; Schools; Active Play.
2013, August	F/P/T ministers responsible for sport, physical activity and recreation called for collaboration and alignment between the Canadian Sport Policy, Active Canada 20/20 and the National Recreation Agenda, Sherbrooke, Quebec.
2014, November	<i>Pathways to Wellbeing. Framework for Recreation in Canada</i> ; National Summit.
2015, February	F/P/T ministers responsible for sport, physical activity and recreation called for review of Active Canada 20/20 with a “view to developing a pan-Canadian framework to be brought to Ministers for endorsement at a future meeting”, ²⁷ Prince George, British Columbia.

Figure 1. The elements of Active Canada 20/20

action. Provincial and territorial delegations agreed to develop and/or align their PA strategies with AC 20/20. Further, they identified national priorities for collective action, which resulted in the development of four actions groups to address active play, active transportation, school PA, and accessibility and diversity. The AC 20/20 Steering Committee identified an additional priority: to advocate for a national PA policy.

As a result of, or in alignment with, the outcomes of the National Gathering, several provinces are developing plans consistent with AC 20/20 (e.g., BC, Saskatchewan) or re-examining existing ones (e.g., Alberta). Further, the Steering Committee is working towards the development of a “business case” in partnership with the Conference Board of Canada,^{27,28} an implementation plan that includes a communications strategy, and an advocacy plan for the creation of a national PA policy. A synthesis that aligns AC 20/20 with the national recreation framework²⁹ and the Canadian Sport Policy 2012³⁰ was conducted in January 2015 in preparation for the meeting later that month of F/P/T ministers responsible for sport, physical activity and recreation in Prince George. Finally, an evaluation framework to establish the baseline criteria for evaluating the impact of Active Canada 20/20 has been developed through funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

SUMMARY

Canada’s approach to increasing PA has been fragmented and has lacked coordination, funding and a strategic approach. AC 20/20 provides both a national plan and a commitment to action from NGO and public sectors with a view to engaging corporate Canada and the general public. It outlines a road map for implementing proactive initiatives to address this prominent health risk factor in the Canadian population. The identified actions are based on the best available evidence and have been endorsed by the majority of representatives in the relevant sectors. The next crucial steps are to engage all those involved in public health promotion, service provision and advocacy at the municipal, provincial and national levels to incorporate AC 20/20 principles into practice and planning, and thus increase the PA level of every person in Canada. Further, governments, as well

as the private, not-for-profit and philanthropic sectors, should demonstrate leadership and continue their efforts toward providing the substantial and sustained resources needed to recalibrate Canadians’ habitual PA patterns; this will ultimately improve the overall health of our citizens. In the absence of a coordinated effort and plan, it will be difficult for a haphazard assortment of programs and initiatives to have any meaningful impact on the national secular trend in physical inactivity.

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RÉSUMÉ

La sédentarité est un grave problème de santé publique. Dans notre commentaire, nous faisons valoir que l'approche du Canada pour accroître l'activité physique est morcelée et souffre d'un manque de coordination, de financement et de stratégie. Nous décrivons ensuite une solution possible, Canada Actif 20/20 (CA 20/20), qui offre à la fois un plan national et un engagement à agir de la part des secteurs non gouvernemental et public en vue d'interpeller les entreprises et le grand public du Canada. CA 20/20 propose une feuille de route pour lancer, coordonner et mettre en œuvre des initiatives d'amont pour aborder cet important facteur de risque pour la santé. Les mesures à prendre sont fondées sur les meilleures preuves disponibles et ont été avalisées par la majorité des représentants des secteurs pertinents. Les prochaines étapes décisives sont de collaborer avec toutes les personnes intervenant dans la promotion de la santé publique, la prestation de services et l'action sociale à l'échelle municipale, provinciale et nationale afin d'intégrer les principes de CA 20/20 dans la pratique et la planification et augmenter ainsi les niveaux d'activité physique de chaque personne au Canada. De plus, les gouvernements, le secteur privé et les secteurs sans but lucratif et philanthropique devraient faire preuve de leadership et poursuivre leurs efforts pour offrir les ressources importantes et soutenues dont on a besoin pour réorienter les habitudes d'activité physique des Canadiens; ceci devrait en bout de ligne améliorer la santé globale de nos citoyens.

MOTS CLÉS : politique; exercice physique; sports