THE INCOMPLETE PICTURE OF FRANCOPHONES LIVING IN DOUBLE-MINORITY SITUATIONS IN NEW BRUNSWICK

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Background

New Brunswick has three large urban areas where Francophones have a two-fold minority status: Saint John, Fredericton and Miramichi. To fulfill the need for services for Francophones, the province established joint school and community centres: the *Centre scolaire communautaire Samuel-de-Champlain* which houses the Médisanté Saint-Jean Health Centre; the *Centre communautaire Sainte-Anne* in Fredericton which houses the Noreen-Richard Health Centre and the *Carrefour Beausoleil* school and community centre in Miramichi. Horizon Health Network runs the community health centres in Saint John and Fredericton. These centres primarily serve the Francophone population found amidst the Anglophone majority.

Most Francophones who live in these regions come from somewhere else. They primarily moved there for their jobs and so their sociodemographic, sociocultural and socioeconomic profiles are not the same as those of Anglophones who are natives of these regions. Thus we find that their needs are not the same as those of the Anglophone community.

The mandate of Horizon Health Network is to provide high-quality care and services in both official languages to everyone in the community. To improve access to French-language services throughout its service area, the Network recently adopted an official languages policy to meet the needs of the public and Francophone patients fairly and equitably. One role of the health networks in New Brunswick is to assess the health needs of citizens and to provide services that meet these needs[1], so in 2012, Horizon Health Network began a process of assessing health needs in New Brunswick communities[2]. **However, the needs assessment process does not take into account the importance of differentiating between the needs of the two linguistic communities in the Saint John, Fredericton and Miramichi regions.**

Data on health determinants, as presented by the NB Health Council in community profiles[3] and in the population health snapshots for Saint John, Fredericton and Miramichi[4], are very pertinent and useful for these communities. However, **because there was no distinction made between the two official language communities in N.B., there have been repercussions on Horizon Health Network's ability to adapt its services to the special needs of this population, to provide French-language services equitably and to adequately plan the workforce needed.** Accurate information specific to the health status and the health and wellness needs of Francophones would allow the Network and other service providers to efficiently plan their services and interventions so as to adequately meet the particular needs of Francophones.

RECOMMENDATION FROM THE REPORT BY GINO LEBLANC, 2010[5]:

"That in its studies, its engagement mechanisms and its work, the New Brunswick Health Council systematically take a separate and comparative look at the state of the health and services of each official language community in the province and that it take into account the distinct and common values of the two linguistic and cultural communities. The Council should also take into consideration and measure the ability of the health authorities to meet the linguistic needs of the two official languages communities."

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The health status of a population is influenced by several factors known as determinants of health. Language, considered one of the determinants of health, is an unavoidable component in delivering high quality health services. A number of studies[6] show that living in a minority language setting poses certain risks for people's health. This is mainly due to the language barriers that these individuals must overcome to access health services and resources. This situation may in some cases have a negative impact on, or even be dangerous to, a patient's safety and wellness.

Francophones in New Brunswick communities where their minority status is two-fold are vulnerable and the data on their health status is essential to ensuring equity and to create a health system capable of providing high quality services that truly meet their needs. However, at this time, there is little to no information to document the health status of the Francophone communities in Saint John, Fredericton, and Miramichi. **The incomplete picture of the health and wellness status of the minority Francophone population in these regions results in challenges related to the provision, effectiveness and equity of health services and thus has a significant impact on individuals' safety and health status.**

In a context of person-centered health services, the development of French-language health services and programs in environments that are primarily Anglophone must first meet the needs of the Francophone community. **However, in reality, the health and wellness services programs offered in health centres in the Saint John, Fredericton and Miramichi regions are not utilized because they don't adequately meet the needs of the Francophone population.** Programs and services such as smoking cessation, respiratory health assessment clinics and the fall prevention program for seniors – *Zoomers On the Go* – are concrete examples of programs that have had little success in the Francophone population. The implementation of these programs and services is based on the needs of the majority, not those of the minority population served by these health centres.

"In our region (Saint John), efforts are being made to offer service in French. However, knowing that there are growing needs within a system offering a multitude of services and very limited resources within the Health Authority, mean that the Health Authority cannot intervene effectively. They intervene where they can instead of where it counts because they have no data. It's like shooting a gun with your eyes shut and hoping to hit the target."

NATHALIE JUSTASON,
President of the Association Régionale de la Communauté francophone de Saint-Jean inc.

Suggestions for Solutions

An approach based on the health of the population should focus on improving the health of all individuals and reducing inequalities by acting on the determinants of health that have a strong influence and an effect on the health of persons, families and communities. A picture of Francophones living in double-minority situations in the Saint John, Fredericton and Miramichi regions based on the determinants of health is a possible solution to obtain a practical tool that could provide individuals, the community and service providers with essential information that they can use to set priorities for the development of new health and wellness programs and services that meet the real needs expressed by Francophones. This community profile would show the links between the determinants of health and the health status of the Francophone population.

The acquisition of local information on children, youth, adults and seniors is important for Francophone communities living in double-minority situations so as to guide their future efforts to deal with the determinants of health, encourage taking responsibility for their health and wellness and promote health and wellness through effective community services and programs adapted to their situation. The picture of the Francophone population of Saint John, Fredericton and Miramichi would be a way to highlight trends with respect to health and wellness, to highlight local particularities and to identify the groups that could be particularly vulnerable. It could also help identify pressing issues within the Francophone community.

Data from these community profiles will also help Horizon Health Network to coordinate its efforts to improve the delivery of various programs and services, to make informed decisions on managing resources and to efficiently meet the health and wellness needs of the Francophone community it serves by providing equitable, safe and high-quality health services.

The public health system represents almost 41% of provincial spending[7]. It has been recognized that the current operations of the present health system are not sustainable and that major changes are needed in how priorities are established for community health and wellness in order to make informed decisions on provincial public health planning[8]. Right now, publicly funded health services do not adequately meet the needs of citizens[9]. We can also add that language barriers represent an additional cost for the health system because of challenges with access to and use of services. If we take into account the health needs of the linguistic minority when planning and delivering health services, we can easily anticipate results such as:

- Reduced consultation time;
- Less duplication in health programs;
- Fewer diagnostic tests;
- Lower probability of error in diagnoses and treatments;
- Better patient understanding of doses or medical instructions;
- Less reliance on emergency rooms.

These few expected results show that services offered and received in one's own language and in reply to the needs stated by a minority community are effective, intelligent means of reducing the costs of health care services in the province.

Conclusion

In the light of the findings herein, it is apparent that Francophones in double-minority situations in the Fredericton, Saint John and Miramichi regions do not have equitable access to health and wellness services and programs in their language of choice. We must not forget that there is a huge disparity between services identified as being "for all" and the reality of accessible French-language services. There is a critical need for evidence on the health status of the Francophone community living in double-minority situations. The fact that the data on the two linguistic communities is combined together does not allow for an accurate picture of Francophones in Fredericton, Saint John and Miramichi and it leads to inconsistent levels of services provided. Thus we feel that it is crucial to prepare a picture of Francophones in double-minority situations in New Brunswick.

It is our hope that this picture could support all stakeholders as they determine regional health priorities for Francophones in Saint John, Fredericton and Miramichi and as they plan activities in their individual areas of intervention.

The *Société Santé et Mieux-être en français du Nouveau-Brunswick* understands the importance of full knowledge, on a local level, of the health needs of the Francophone population, and it is committed to partnering with the various stakeholders to improve access to health services for the Francophone and Acadian population of New Brunswick based on evidence that identifies the needs of Francophone communities in terms of health and wellness, provision of health services and a workforce capable of providing services in French.

"Beyond the size of the issue and the nobleness of the objective, efforts to improve public health are an investment for all sectors of activity: a population in good health is the foundation of a dynamic society in which all individuals can live up to their full potential and contribute to the development of their community.[10]"

POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

- Department of Health
- Horizon Health Network
- Association Régionale de la Communauté francophone de Saint-Jean inc.
- Médisanté Saint-Jean
- Centre communautaire Sainte-Anne
- Noreen-Richard Health Centre in Fredericton
- Carrefour Beausoleil in Miramichi
- Société Santé et Mieux-être en français du Nouveau-Brunswick
- Mouvement Acadien des Communautés en Santé du Nouveau-Brunswick
- New Brunswick Health Council
- Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities
- Wellness Branch, Department of Social Development

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