



Michael Smith Foundation for  
**Health Research**

Infrastructure Programs  
**Health of Population Networks**  
March 5 & 6, 2007  
External Oversight Review Panel  
Comments Summary

**Grant Number:** IN NTG 102 045  
**Network Name:** BC Environmental and Occupational Health Research Network  
**Contact Name:** Drs. Kennedy and Harder  
**Panel Rating:** Excellent (range: 4.0-4.4)

## Summary of Oversight Review Panel Deliberations

### General Comments

The original formative review of the BC Environmental and Occupational Health Research Network raised two major points: 1) the Network encompasses two major fields: environmental health and occupational health, and 2) the Network's focus on knowledge translation as opposed to playing a leading role in the development of research priorities. The current panel was impressed by the Network's progress in the past two years and commended it on its growth in membership, and its explicit focus on nurturing trainees through its mentoring programs. However, the panel also expressed some concern over the broad mandate and lack of apparent strategic focus.

### A. Measurable Outcomes/Added Value

The panel agreed that the Network has met several of the measurable outcomes stated in its original proposal, most particularly the recruitment of Network members. It is also clear that the Network has been able to build on existing strengths such as the CIHR-funded strategic training program and established formal links with the National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health (based at BC CDC), and has been able to foster linkages to realize more positive impacts as well as leverage existing resources. However, the broad mandate of the Network was of some concern to the panel. Although the Network has argued that synergies can be gained by addressing both fields under this Network's ambit, the current panel still believes that the broad mandate might limit the Network's ability to clearly demonstrate added value. Furthermore, the panel commented on the Network's decision to focus more on knowledge translation instead of also defining research priorities; in this regard the Network appears to be uniquely acting more as a knowledge broker and focusing on the dissemination of existing research; a more balanced agenda may be desirable.

### B. Management & Accountability

Overall, the panel was impressed by the management and accountability structure of the Network. The leadership and staffing structures are clearly delineated and there appears to be excellent representation of the different constituencies. Furthermore, the working group model seems to align well with the stated outcome areas. There was some concern, however, that the proportion of expenses allocated for administrative purposes is quite high and should be lowered so that more money can be allocated to capacity building, collaborative research initiatives and knowledge exchange and transfer.

### **C. Participation and Capacity Building**

The panel was very impressed by the Network's recruitment of members from diverse sectors in all regions of the province. The inclusion of research users and other stakeholders, in addition to researchers was specifically noted. While the network has a large membership it was unclear as to how active the members are. It was suggested that definitions of membership (i.e. active or associate) would facilitate determining how effective the networks' activities are in terms of serving its different constituencies and developing more precise outcome measures. As such, the Network should regularly evaluate whether it is meeting the needs of its diverse members. Given the breadth of the Network's mandate, a more strategic focus on capacity building activities may be needed in subsequent years to clearly demonstrate impact by addressing niche areas and/or gaps and to explore possible synergies between the two fields within the scope of the Network. Student participation in the Network is a clear strength and the training of students and young investigators seems to be supported by a strong mentoring working group, which includes an exciting range of disciplines. That being said, the panel was concerned by the Network's engagement of students in casual paid jobs. This was not seen as the most effective way for the Network to support students, who should be encouraged to put their efforts into their own research projects in order to obtain their degrees in an optimal timeframe.

### **D. Collaborations & Knowledge Transfer (KT)**

It is evident that the Network has spent considerable time and energy on knowledge translation activities. Given the breadth of its mandate and the inherent diversity of research users with whom the Network can relate, strategic partnerships appear to be key in implementing the knowledge translation portions of the Network's mandate. The panel thought that the focus put on communication infrastructure to support research collaborations was appropriate and were impressed by the comprehensive website and functional database. In the coming years, the Network should explore ways to further extend knowledge transfer applications to research users.

### **E. Future Directions**

Given the current breadth of the Network's mandate, the panel would like to encourage the Network to take the risk and adopt a more strategic role in defining priorities within the fields of environmental and occupational health research in BC, and in building core teams to support them. The Network has adopted this approach already to some extent in its mentoring initiative. Although the Network has made a solid attempt to outline outcomes for the subsequent years, these may need to be further refined, to include metrics around the development and support of teams. The metrics should also support the Network in demonstrating what its major contributions are to both environmental and occupational health domains. The panel felt that the Network is concentrating its KT activities on knowledge found in the literature instead of new knowledge generated by its members. This role of "knowledge broker" also raises issues as to the value-add of the Network in terms of creating new knowledge. Finally, new investments should be targeted towards supporting the direct costs of addressing research priorities rather than further administration.