



National Collaborating Centre  
for Methods and Tools

Centre de collaboration nationale  
des méthodes et outils

# Newsletter

Summer • 2008 • ISSUE 3

## Helen Thomas: “fun, frank and fearless”

### NCCMT bids a fond farewell to its founding scientific co-director

Most people who know Helen Thomas take the news of her retirement with a grain of salt. No one can quite believe that she won't still have her hand in the Canadian public health pie one way or another.

Surprisingly, Thomas describes herself as a “come-lately” to public health, having been involved in the field for “only” the past 20 years.

So what is it about Helen Thomas that led her from her role as a pediatric nurse in small-town eastern and northern Ontario to that of an advocate for evidence-informed public health practice and policy at the national level?

“I get bored easily,” she says.

Thomas became dissatisfied with the routine and regimentation of clinical nursing. Eventually, back in Hamilton and working for McMaster University Medical Centre in the pediatric area, Thomas was encouraged to join McMaster University as a clinical instructor. After earning her Master's degree, she rejoined McMaster as an assistant professor.

Academia was a good fit. According to Thomas, the university “allows you to keep reinventing yourself. If you get bored with what you're doing, you can go and do something else.”

In 1989, she joined one of Ontario's newly created Teaching Health Units (THU) that brought together academic researchers, local program planners and front line public health practitioners. THUs gave public health a greater presence in university curriculum development and allowed researchers to see how their work translated into practice. According to Thomas, the THUs became a bridge between the health department culture and the university culture. “In reality, we were at the beginning of knowledge exchange,” she says.

Knowledge (syntheses, translation and exchange) continued to be a focus. In 2007, Thomas and long-time friend and colleague



Donna Ciliska became scientific co-directors of the new National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools (NCCMT).

In Thomas' words, the NCCMT is committed to “improving access to relevant methods and tools”, “transforming knowledge into a user-friendly format for public health stakeholders involved in policy-making, program decisions, practice and research in Canada,” and exploring effective strategies to improve utilization of evidence in public health policy and program planning. The long-term goal is improved health for Canadians.

While still a staunch advocate of evidence-informed public health, Thomas admits that the “theoretical, academic stuff” can prove frustrating. Beneath the university professor and researcher, she is still guided by her clinical experience. “Of course, policy-makers need the methods and tools. But, I'm a clinician,” she says. “A clinical

... continued on back page >>>

## INSIDE

### 2

#### Activities and updates:

NCCMT Registry Project  
[health-evidence.ca](http://health-evidence.ca)

Effective Public Health  
Practice and Policy

### 3

#### Coming Events:

2008 Summer Institute  
NCCMT hosts Knowledge  
Management conference

#### New Product:

Compendium of Critical  
Appraisal Tools provides  
a quick reference.

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The NCCMT is affiliated with McMaster University.

## Activities and Updates

### Registry of KT Methods and Tools nearly complete

After months of planning and development work supported by an international Advisory Group of methodologists, public health policy and decision makers, and knowledge translation experts, we are nearing the launch of our online Registry of Knowledge Translation Methods and Tools for Public Health.

As an on-going service of the NCCMT, the Registry will provide policy and program decision makers in public health with access to an expanding inventory of methods (processes) and tools (products) to assist with planning, doing and evaluating knowledge synthesis, dissemination, exchange and application activities.

The searchable online database will provide brief and comprehensive descriptions of the methods and tools and allow users to compare them across a number of key characteristics to help inform decisions about which methods or tools can best meet their needs and contexts.

The Registry is expected to go live with four to six methods and tools and be populated with many more over the months and years to come.

The registry will be accessible through the NCCMT website: [www.nccmt.ca](http://www.nccmt.ca). For more information, please e-mail [registry@mcmaster.ca](mailto:registry@mcmaster.ca)

### Effective Public Health Practice Project releases two new reviews

The Effective Public Health Practice Project (EPHPP) has recently released two new systematic reviews:

1. Workplace interventions to reduce substance misuse (June 20, 2008)
2. Community-based and primary-care interventions in reducing obesity among adults in the general population (July 15, 2008)

The EPHPP has just completed a national survey that asked public health officials for topic suggestions. EPHPP will be extrapolating the data, cross-referencing topics and checking for the viability of producing reviews on the suggested topics. A list of potential research questions that could be addressed is expected by the end of July.

Congratulations to the Cochrane Health Promotion and Public Health Field that became the Cochrane Public Health Review Group in May 2008. The EPHPP is looking forward to working with the new review group and will contribute future reviews to the new group, utilizing the Cochrane format.

For further information, visit [www.hamilton.ca/ephpp](http://www.hamilton.ca/ephpp) or e-mail [EPHPP@mcmaster.ca](mailto:EPHPP@mcmaster.ca).

### Enhanced website for health-evidence.ca

[www.health-evidence.ca](http://www.health-evidence.ca) is a free, searchable online registry of research evidence evaluating the effectiveness of all public health interventions, including more than 1,200 systematic reviews. It saves time and money by eliminating the need for public health decision makers to search for, retrieve, assess and synthesize evidence about the impact of public health interventions. This results in more efficient and effective delivery of public health programs and services.

Recently added functions to the site include

- enhanced capability to search the database
- options to maintain a personalized search history
- ability to sort results, and
- additional information on each article provided at a glance.

The site provides up-to-date, relevant information quickly and easily for decision makers at every level of public health. The site welcomes more than 150 visitors daily, with 22,686 reported in 2007. Users tell [health-evidence.ca](http://health-evidence.ca) of their satisfaction with the site:

- “thank you for your excellent website and resource”
- “this site is very user friendly”
- “everything is at my fingertips.”

If you have any questions or comments, or would like more information, please visit [www.health-evidence.ca](http://www.health-evidence.ca).

## Coming Events

### Summer Institute 2008 in Kelowna

Don't miss this opportunity to participate in the National Collaborating Centre's 3rd Annual Summer Institute in beautiful Kelowna, BC, from August 5-7, 2008. In keeping with this emphasis on relationship-building and interaction, the theme this year's institute in Knowledge, Synthesis, Translation and Exchange is KSTE in Action.

To register please visit <http://summerinstitute.nccph.ca>

### NCCMT to host Knowledge Management conference

There is no shortage of knowledge in public health in Canada. Our challenge is what to do with all that knowledge. Exactly what do we know? How do we know it? How can we share what we know? With whom? And, perhaps most importantly, when?

**Knowledge Management in Public Health: Exploring Culture, Content, Process and Technology** is an opportunity to examine and discuss the benefits and challenges of implementing a knowledge management strategy for public health, whether moving knowledge from person to person, or sector to sector.

Join us November 3 & 4 in Hamilton, Ontario. For more information or to register, visit the NCCMT website.

#### Knowledge Management in Public Health:

Exploring  
**Culture,  
Content,  
Process and  
Technology**

Hamilton, Ontario  
November 3 & 4, 2008

We welcome your feedback.

Send your comments or questions to [nccmt@mcmaster.ca](mailto:nccmt@mcmaster.ca).

This newsletter is edited by Jeannie Mackintosh, communications coordinator for the NCCMT



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An Introduction to Evidence-Based Public Health and  
A Compendium of Critical Appraisal Tools  
for Public Health Practice

Donna Ciliska • Helen Thomas • Cathy Buffett

February 2008

## New Product:

### Introduction to Evidence-Informed Public Health and Compendium of Critical Appraisal Tools

The NCCMT has just released a paper written primarily for busy public health managers and policy-makers who may have little or no experience in assessing qualitative or quantitative research. The paper includes a seven-step introduction to evidence-informed public health and a compendium of critical appraisal tools.

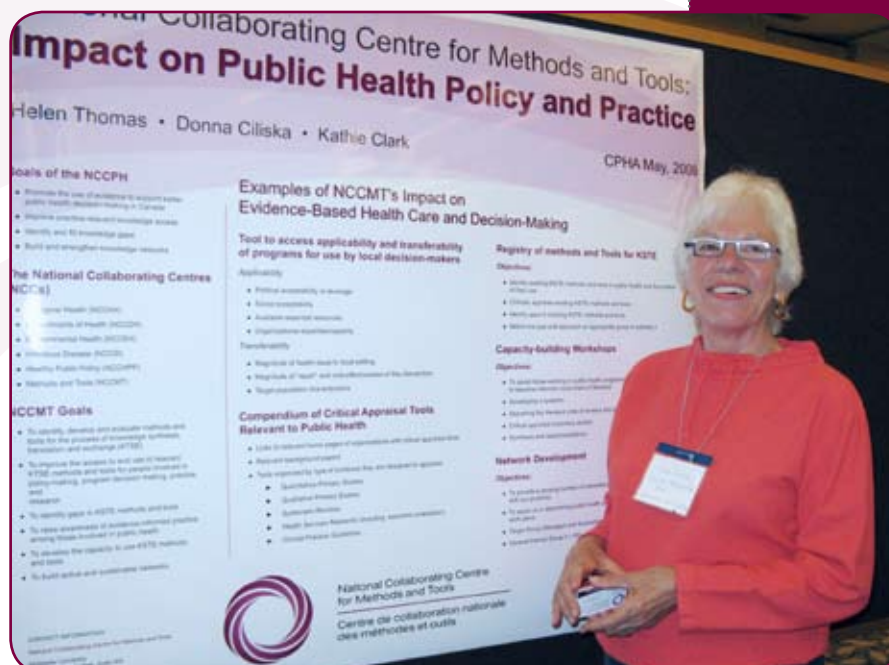
In theory, evidence-informed public health makes perfect sense. There is widespread acknowledgement that the highest quality evidence is critically important for the process of moving knowledge into public health practice. But, in the real world of tight deadlines and scarce resources, many public health practitioners just don't have the time or energy to implement all the principles of evidence-informed decision-making.

Critical appraisal provides an efficient method of reviewing evidence for its quality, and is an important part of the process of evidenced-informed practice and policy development. The Compendium of Critical Appraisal Tools provides web links to tools and checklists to help busy professionals access rigorous studies with valid conclusions that will help them identify interventions that might be applicable in their own situations.

The compendium is available on the NCCMT website.

Helen Thomas represented the NCCMT at the pre-conference workshops and sessions at CPHA 2008 in Halifax.

She also presented a poster on the impact of the NCCMT on evidence-informed decision-making.



*Helen Thomas continued ...*

background keeps you grounded... and tells you how the world really works.”

She knows that front line workers don't have time to read all the research being produced. That understanding of “how the world really works” may explain her commitment to providing rigorous systematic reviews for busy practitioners with both the Effective Public Health Practice Project (EPHPP) and the Cochrane Public Health Review Group.

Thomas' EPHPP colleague, Marlene Mirza, “is determined to continue Helen's extraordinary efforts by ensuring that our systematic reviews maintain the high-calibre of research she would expect and reach a broader audience every year.”

Thomas is a passionate non-conformist who, according to Ciliska, follows a simple philosophy: “We could ask for permission, but I would prefer to apologize later.”

There is no doubt that Helen Thomas is going to leave a big hole when she leaves, but there seems to be a bit of skepticism about whether she'll actually be able to walk away. As Thomas' official retirement date looms, some speculate that they might hear her familiar phrase: Deadlines amuse me.

Thomas acknowledges that planning is not her thing. “Donna [Ciliska] would talk about her five-year career plan. I never gave much thought to that,” she says. Thomas' career plan was simple: “I just did what I did ... then, when I didn't want to do that anymore, I did something else.”

“Survival was my objective,” she says. “I never planned my career. I was just in the right place at the right time.”

This July, the right place will be the arctic when Thomas will travel to Nunavut via the Hudson Strait off Baffin Island, through Hudson's Bay and on to Churchill, Manitoba. Her goal: to see polar bears. The trek will be far from luxurious. “I'm too young to go on a cruise,” she says. “... Maybe when I'm old.”



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