Translating evidence into practice with the National Advisory Committee on Sexually Transmitted and Blood-Borne Infections

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Abstract

For over 30 years, the Government of Canada has developed guidelines on sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBI) with a group of subject matter experts. This expert group provided advice to the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) from 2004 to 2019; transitioning to the National Advisory Committee on STBBI (NAC-STBBI) in 2019. NAC-STBBI supports PHAC’s mandate to prevent and control infectious diseases by providing advice for the development of STBBI guidelines. The methodology for developing the NAC-STBBI recommendations is evolving to a more rigorous, systematic and transparent process that is consistent with current standards in guideline development. It is also informed by—and aligned with—the methods of several other major guideline developers. The methodology incorporates the Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE) approach, as appropriate, when conducting evidence reviews and developing recommendations. Recommendations will be published on the canada.ca website with the supporting NAC-STBBI Statement detailing the methodology and evidence used to develop them. This process will ensure that PHAC provides trustworthy evidence-based STBBI recommendations to primary care providers and public health professionals.

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Introduction

Sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBI) remain a public health threat to Canadians. Rates of chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis have increased steadily in recent years (1), and multiple provinces and territories declared outbreaks of syphilis in 2018 (2) and 2019 (3). The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) provides national leadership for the prevention and control of STBBI through the development of evidence-based public health guidelines. The recommendations in these guidelines are developed—with PHAC support—by the National Advisory Committee on STBBI (NAC-STBBI), an external advisory body of subject matter experts from across Canada. This article describes the new STBBI recommendation development process followed by PHAC and NAC-STBBI.

Background

An expert group has provided advice to the Government of Canada for more than 30 years. The first advisory committee—the Expert Interdisciplinary Advisory Committee on Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) in Children and Youth—was established in 1986 by Health and Welfare Canada to provide advice and guidance for the prevention and control of STD. In 1988, this committee published the first Canadian Guidelines for the Treatment of Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Neonates, Children, Adolescents and Adults (4). While the Advisory Committee was disbanded in 1991, the Expert Working Group on STD was struck in 1998 under the authority of Health Canada’s Laboratory Centre for Disease Control for the purpose of developing guidelines.

Following the creation of PHAC in 2004, the Expert Working Group on STD began providing advice to PHAC, and the name was changed to the Expert Working Group for the Canadian Guidelines on Sexually Transmitted Infections. In 2019, the
Group transitioned to a formal external advisory body that is based on the principles and requirements set out under federal government legislation and policies (5).

**Mandate and membership**

NAC-STBBI provides PHAC with ongoing, timely advice and recommendations for the development of STBBI guidelines, in support of its mandate to prevent and control infectious diseases in Canada. PHAC retains all decision-making authority and decides how it will use the recommendations and advice of the external advisory body.

NAC-STBBI carries out its mandate as follows: reviewing the epidemiology and scientific literature on STBBI as well as the evidence on specific prevention strategies, diagnosis and treatment; providing advice based on the best available literature evidence or, where there is a paucity of literature evidence, based on expert knowledge and practice; and advising PHAC about current and emerging issues relating to STBBI.

NAC-STBBI consists of 15 voting members with expertise in the areas of healthcare epidemiology, infectious disease, medical microbiology, laboratory diagnostics, pharmacology, obstetrics and gynecology, paediatrics, primary care, psychology, and public health. Recruitment ensures members have a range of knowledge, expertise and experience, as well as varied perspectives. Consideration is also given to geographic representation given that challenges may differ across Canada.

PHAC ("the Secretariat") assesses and manages competing interests for NAC-STBBI members who must declare any conflicts upon joining, on an annual basis and prior to each meeting to maintain impartiality of the committee.

**Recommendation development process**

The methodology for developing the NAC-STBBI recommendations is evolving to a more rigorous, systematic and transparent process to formulate trustworthy recommendations. This new approach was informed by best practice standards in guideline development (6–9) and the methodology of several other major guideline developers (10–16). A manual has been drafted outlining the methodology, which is summarized herein and illustrated in Figure 1.

The Secretariat conducts a topic selection and prioritization exercise annually (or on an as-needed basis) to help determine which areas to focus on to update or reaffirm existing recommendations or develop new recommendations during the upcoming fiscal year. Figure 2 illustrates the topic selection and prioritization exercise. This exercise involves the following:

1. Soliciting topics for development of recommendations

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**Abbreviations:** NAC-STBBI, National Advisory Committee on Sexually Transmitted and Blood-Borne Infections; PHAC, Public Health Agency of Canada
When conducting a systematic review, the steps undertaken by the external evidence review team will include the following: screening the titles, abstracts and selected full-text articles based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria; extracting data; assessing the risk of bias; performing quantitative and/or qualitative synthesis; and preparing the GRADE evidence tables (6,9). The quality/certainty of evidence is graded separately across studies (as high, moderate, low or very low) for each important outcome (9). The systematic review article is prepared based on the PRISMA checklist and the PRISMA flow diagram is used to show the study selection process (22–25). The final version of the article is published in a peer-reviewed journal.

The GRADE Evidence to Decision framework is drafted to help the WG use evidence in a structured and transparent way to develop recommendations (9,26–30). The overall quality of evidence is assessed across outcomes (9,26–30).

Other types of evidence reviews, such as narrative reviews or rapid reviews, may be conducted for certain guidance products. When evidence from the literature is very limited, recommendations are developed based on expert opinion using a systematic and transparent approach.

The WG drafts recommendations using the GRADE wording for direction and strength, as appropriate, (9,14) and presents them to NAC-STBBI for discussion and voting. NAC-STBBI Statement, drafted by the WG, includes the need for the recommendations, the methodology used, the evidence considered, the final recommendations and a summary of the NAC-STBBI deliberations. The Statement is reviewed by NAC-STBBI and published on the canada.ca website after PHAC approvals. The relevant PHAC STBBI guides (formerly the Canadian Guidelines on Sexually Transmitted Infections) are updated with the recommendations.

Conclusion

The methodology for developing the NAC-STBBI recommendations is evolving to meet best practice standards and will continue to be improved and refined as appropriate. The new methodology combined with the ongoing support and expert advice of NAC-STBBI will ensure that PHAC provides trustworthy evidence-based STBBI recommendations to primary care providers and public health professionals.

Authors’ statement

SS — Conceptualization, methodology, writing of original draft, review and editing
SG — Conceptualization, writing of original draft, review and editing
MGR — Conceptualization, review and editing
Competing interests
None.

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