

8. Federal-Provincial Cooperation

One of the biggest problems during the Ontario SARS crisis was the inability of the federal and provincial governments to get their acts together. A few people of exceptional talent from both levels of government did their best to bridge the gap and make things work. Unfortunately they were unsupported by any machinery of cooperation or any tradition of working together to solve problems.

In light of all the recommendations for change in public health systems, federally by Dean Naylor and Senator Kirby, and provincially by Dean Walker and this Commission, the evidence from SARS makes one thing crystal clear: the greatest benefit from new public health arrangements can be a new federal presence in support of provincial delivery of public health. The greatest danger from new public health arrangements can be further turf wars between the federal and provincial governments, turf wars of the kind that so badly hampered our national, provincial and municipal fight against SARS.

Too many good ideas in this country have been destroyed by mindless federal-provincial infighting. The most noble and appealing proposals for reform falter so often in Canada simply because of the inherent bureaucratic and political mistrust between the two levels of government. If a greater spirit of federal-provincial cooperation is not forthcoming in respect of public health protection, Ontario and the rest of Canada will be at greater risk from infectious disease and will look like fools in the international community. While there are hopeful signs that more cooperation will be forthcoming, noted above, it will take hard work from both levels of government to overcome the lack of coordination demonstrated during SARS.

Ontario and Canada must avoid bickering and must create strong public health links based on cooperation rather than competition, avoiding the pitfalls of federal overreaching and provincial distrust.