



Message From The Co-Chairperson

A central component of the vital statistics system for mortality is the coding of the cause of death. In Canada, we utilize an automated coding system that was developed at the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). This fall in Washington, D.C., Canada participated in the second meeting of the International Collaborative Effort on Automating Mortality Statistics (Mortality ICE). This international forum was created to exchange information on the application of computer technology to the collection, production, and dissemination of mortality statistics. These systems have the potential of producing higher quality and more timely mortality statistics, and promoting the international comparability of mortality statistics.

Attended by over 70 persons from 24 countries, the meeting built on many of the themes established in the first Mortality ICE conference, including the encouragement of cooperative development, the support for education for coders, and data quality. Several countries, including Sweden, France, Australia and Brazil, provided overviews of their automated coding systems. As well, the U.S. updated participants on developments in their software.

It was reassuring to observe that all the countries are using essentially the same approach for automated coding. There has been significant progress in the cooperative development of the underlying logic in the various software.

There were discussions of various methodological issues including multiple cause-of-death analysis and comparability studies. The comparability studies looked at the impact of the introduction of automated coding; and while there was no doubt that a well designed system increases quality, any expectations for an early reduction in cost have not been realized.

Of particular interest, given the direction we are moving here in Canada, were the presentations on electronic death registration systems, which are being developed and implemented in the United Kingdom and the United States.

A new development at the meeting was the formation of an Automated Coding System (ACS) users' group. It will have the express purpose of offering technical assistance and systems support,

input to software developers, and general information sharing, with news and updates on ICD-9 and ICD-10. The ACS users' group will address system software issues with expert input from nosologists. Thus, if the software is handling a cause of death incorrectly, that is, at variance with manual coding, then the software will have to be adjusted accordingly and all ACS users — possibly through a "listserv" — will be notified of the problem and the software changes made to address the problem. The users' group would have a website containing Frequently Asked Questions, as well as an archive and an index. Initially, core members of the users' group will be the Mortality ICE Planning Committee.

The Mortality ICE meeting, sponsored by NCHS, illustrated that real progress had been achieved since the first meeting. This encourages ongoing efforts to further its goal of improving the quality, timeliness, and international comparability of mortality statistics through the application of technology for data collection, processing, and dissemination of better quality data.♦

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The Choice of Surname for Children in Québec

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The choice of the father's surname for naming children has been used to such a degree that the law was previously silent on this aspect of family life. Prior to the significant changes in lifestyles that began in the 1970s, a number of jurisdictions undertook to update their legislation on family

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matters. Québec chose to leave the choice of the family surname to the parents, and to impose on women the retention of their birth surnames for their lifetime. This article will focus on the historical evolution of this new behavioural model.

Until 1981, the silence of the law theoretically permitted parents to give the surname of their choice to their children, but the custom was to give the father's surname to children, while the wife in daily life used the surname of her husband. (It should be noted that women always used their birth name, sometimes referred to as maiden name, in the acts of registration with Vital Statistics, which greatly facilitated the work of genealogists and historical demographers.) Then in 1981, the section of family law under the Civil Code came into effect. There are two sections which particularly concern the surname. In the first, it is stipulated that: "In marriage, both spouses retain their respective surnames, and exercise their respective civil rights under those surnames." (Article 393, Civil Code.) The legislators were only bringing the law in line with common usage, and no problems were encountered. The fact that younger women no longer used the husband's surname meant that family members no longer shared a common surname.

The second item of interest is the choice of the name for a child: "A child is given, at the choice of his father and mother, one or more given names and the surname of one of them or a surname consisting of not more than two parts taken from the surnames of his father and mother." (Article 51, Civil Code.) In other words, if the parents each have a single family surname, they have four choices for the surname of the child: one or other of their surnames, or a hyphenated surname composed of both parental surnames, listed in either order. There are as yet few parents who have a combination surname, but if this is the case, they have the problem of choosing from among 16 possibilities for their children: four single surnames comprising a part of either the father's or mother's surname, and 12 combination surnames comprising the permutations of the four parts of the surnames of the parents. Finally, it should be noted that it is not necessary to give the same surname to all children in the family.

This section of the legislation is the result of a compromise. The Commissioners of the Office for the Revision of the Civil Code suggested the compulsory use of the patronymic (i.e., the father's surname), which would automatically be transferred

to the child; but the Advisory Council on the Status of Women favoured a combination surname, with the mother's surname always preceding the father's surname. In the second generation, the mother would drop the first part of her name and the husband the second part. The Council based this on the principle of equality of the partners, but it was also based on the interest of the child in the event of a break-up: carrying the name of the father and mother will prevent useless trauma in cases of separation or divorce, when the child goes to live with one or other of the parents.

The arguments of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women cause us to briefly present important changes in the domain of family law which accompanied the changes in the manner of naming children. In the mid-1970s, marriage began a spectacular and unexpected decline. It was thought that common law unions would only delay legal marriage, but today's reality is that young couples will often not embrace the institution of marriage. Examination of the evolution of the proportion of births outside marriage is very instructive. In 1997, 55% of births occurred outside of marriage. At the beginning of the 1950s, only 3% of births occurred outside marriage, and it was only in the mid-1960s that the number began to slowly rise. In the mid-1970s, the figures reached 10%, and since then, have increased regularly.

During these years, the proportion of births where the father is unknown or not declared remained remarkably stable at just below 5%. This signifies, of course, that births outside marriage are only associated with the drop in legal marriage and have nothing to do with births previously categorized as illegitimate. In earlier times, such a birth could lead to marriage, but in 1997, the proportion of second births outside marriage surpassed 50% for the first time; it is quite evident that many families will no longer ever be united by the bonds of marriage.

The bonds of marriage have become fragile, and approximately 30% of marriages that took place in the early 1970s are already dissolved by divorce 25 years later. Following a divorce involving children, the mother is granted custody 75% of the time while the father receives custody in 15% of cases; joint custody occurs in 10% of divorces involving children.

According to the 1996 census, one in five children live in single-parent families with the mother. Further, there are children who live with the father or with the mother in a reconstructed family, and lived only with a single biological parent; according

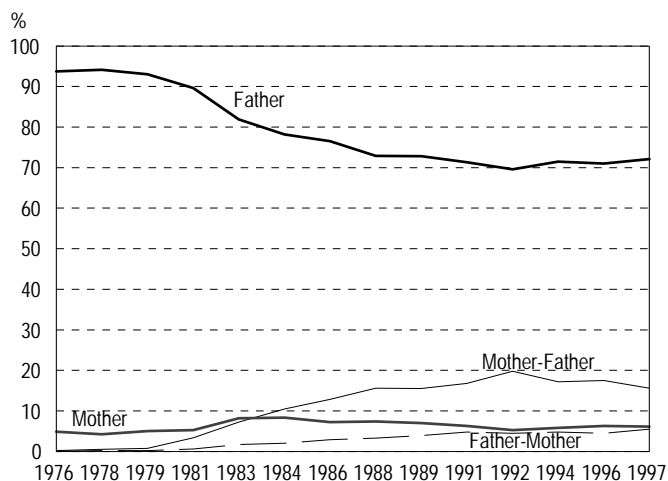
to a study of children under the age of 12 years, 90% of children live in this situation with their mothers. By combining the two situations, it is estimated that one in five children live with the biological mother, either alone or with a stepfather.

In Québec, there is a system of double registration of births; one is registration by Vital Statistics under the Register of civil status, the other is a statistical/medical registration under the *Institut de la statistique du Québec*. Actually, the two registration notices are located on each side of the same form. The statistical notice is processed quickly, since it is sent to the *Institut de la statistique du Québec* during the week following the birth. The parents must complete the declaration of birth and return it to the vital statistics Director in the 30 days subsequent to the birth. The statistical notice is signed by one of the parents and the birth attendant, but the legal name is that which appears on the vital statistics form, and it is possible that some parents modify their choice between both declarations. However, the statistical files are more easily used even though they contain some errors or missing data, in particular the lack of the child's name (which occurs in less than 1% of births). The missing data were prorated based on the known data. Regional data were not presented for the Outaouais region because of the automatic attribution in one hospital of double surnames for children. To develop historic data, we created a sample of 6,000 births for each year from 1976 to 1997, and we used the entire database of 85,000 births for a more detailed analysis for 1996.

In 1997, the large majority of children, 72%, still received the father's surname (Figure 1). The parents gave a combination surname to 21% of births, and 6% of births received the mother's surname. Among combination surnames, the mother's surname is listed first in three out of four cases; in 16% of cases, the surname is composed of the mother's surname followed by that of the father; and in 5% of cases, the father's surname is followed by the mother's surname. Those cases where the surnames of the parents are identical have been reported separately and comprise 1% of isonymous couples. Similar surnames have not been isolated, such as Ouellet and Ouellette, nor improbable combinations such as Leboeuf-Haché ("minced beef" or "hamburger" in English) or Lemoine-Allaire ("nude dick" in English), which would seem to be a potential source of material for humourists. The proportion of isonymous couples was quite constant throughout the study period.

The changing patterns in choosing surnames has occurred quite rapidly. In 1976, very few children (0.3%) received a combination surname, while by

Figure 1
Evolution of Choice of Child's Surname, Québec, 1976-1997



1980 the level was just under 2%. By 1985, the proportion had already climbed to 14%, reaching a peak of 24% in 1992—just 10 years after the introduction of the new Code. Combination surnames with the mother's surname listed first are in much more favour than those beginning with the father's surname. In 1992, one in five children was given a combination surname beginning with the mother's surname, but the proportion diminished in 1997 to 16%.

It is paternal surnames which are losing popularity. Children born in 1980 received the father's surname in 93% of cases; that proportion lowered to 70% in 1992 and 1993, while from 1994 to 1996 it remained stable at 71%. Up until 1982, the proportions of children of unknown fathers and of children receiving the mother's surname remained similar and quite stable at just under 5%. Following the adoption of the new Code, there was an increase in children receiving a mother's surname exclusively; the proportion reached 8% for several years, then decreased to around 6%, where it has remained since 1990.

The choice of the surname used first in a combination surname is not made haphazardly, and shows preference for the maternal line in three out of four cases. In totalling the combination surnames beginning with the mother's surname and adding those cases where only the mother's surname

is used, we thus get more than a fifth of children identified by what we could term the “matronymic.” In 1992, this proportion rose to one in four children.

There is no doubt that unmarried mothers are more inclined to adopt combination surnames beginning with the mother’s surname than are married women. Since 1984, unmarried mothers give a combination surname beginning with their surname to one in four children. The proportion has not changed significantly since then, except to decrease somewhat in later years. It must be recalled that the number of unmarried mothers is increasing and that this pattern is becoming the standard. Women of other matrimonial state are, for the most part, divorced and make the same choices as unmarried mothers. As for children of married mothers, since the beginning of the 1990s, more than one in 10 children receive a combination surname beginning with the mother’s surname. ♦

The preceding article has been abstracted from a presentation prepared for the Symposium “Surnames—history-anthropology-society” given at the Centre Jacques Cartier, Lyon, France, in December 1998. Part II will follow in a later issue.

Vital Statistics Data Quality Improvement Workshop: Revitalizing Partnerships and Alliances

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The Office of the Registrar General, Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations, in partnership with Statistics Canada, co-hosted a Vital Statistics Data Quality Improvement Workshop on March 29-31, 1999 at historic Old Fort William in Thunder Bay. This was the first workshop of its kind, and it brought together a broad spectrum of vital statistics users, providers and partners at the provincial level. More than 50 stakeholders and business partners from municipal, provincial and federal organizations and representatives from Vital Statistics agencies representing Manitoba, Newfoundland and Quebec, attended the workshop.

The objectives of the workshop were fourfold:

- To provide a forum for open dialogue for both users and providers of vital statistics data;
- To create an awareness of the challenges facing Vital Statistics agencies such as the Office of the Registrar General;
- To discuss the roles and responsibilities of all partners; and
- To identify short- and long-term strategic directions for improving the quality of vital statistics data.

Workshop presentations and discussions on the first day focused on the providers of vital statistics data. Key partners such as Division Registrars, members of the clergy, and representatives of the Funeral Homes Association and the Coroner’s Office provided their perspective on data quality and other pertinent issues that they face in the daily operation of their business.

The second day of the workshop concentrated on the users of vital statistics data. The Laboratory Centre for Disease Control of Health Canada, the Public Health Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Health, and the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences stressed the value and importance of data quality from the user’s perspective. The value of the data for government administration was identified in the keynote address given by Rennie Molnar of Elections Canada; these points were echoed in presentations made by Human Resources Development Canada and representatives from the City of Toronto.

On the third day, the management from the Office of the Registrar General and the representatives attending from the other Vital Statistics agencies met to discuss and summarize the key issues and concerns arising from the first two days of the workshop and to identify areas of focus for improving data quality in the short and long term.

Overall, participants became more aware of the importance of vital statistics and its data over and above their individual organizational concerns and needs. Some of the areas where vital statistics was identified to be important included entitlement for an individual’s rights and properties (e.g., estate settlements), an individual’s entitlement to government services (i.e., health cards and social assistance), the needs of law enforcement (such as verifying identities and updating police records), the

management of national registries (such as Statistics Canada or Elections Canada), and medical research and demographic studies (including population projections and health planning).

The evaluations indicated that the workshop was very well received and met its objectives. The common consensus among all participants was extremely positive and many appreciated the opportunity to meet other stakeholders in person.

There was also enthusiasm for the local naturalist who provided participants with a unique presentation on the character of the Northwestern Ontario landscape.

By all accounts the workshop was a great success. As a next step, the Office of the Registrar General will develop a comprehensive data quality improvement strategy. ♦

Vital Statistics Council for Canada Annual Meeting

What: The Vital Statistics Council for Canada 2000 Meeting with Representatives from Provincial/Territorial Vital Statistics Agencies, Statistics Canada, NAPHSIS and NCHS

When: May 30 - June 1, 2000

Where: Statistics Canada, Ottawa, Ontario

Organizations who wish to make a presentation to the Council at this meeting should address their requests no later than March 31, 2000 to:

Secretariat
Vital Statistics Council for Canada
c/o Health Statistics Division
Statistics Canada
18th Floor, R.H. Coats Building
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0T6
Telephone: (613) 951-1765

ON A TYPICAL DAY IN PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND IN 1997

The following events were recorded:

4 LIVE BIRTHS OCCURRED IN THE PROVINCE TO PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND RESIDENTS:

- 2 males and 2 females were born
- 4 were born to teenage mothers every 10 days
- 15 were born to unmarried parents every 10 days
- 2 low birth weight babies (less than 2500 grams) were born every 10 days
- 1 multiple birth occurred per month
- 5 stillbirths occurred that year

3 DEATHS OCCURRED IN THE PROVINCE TO PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND RESIDENTS:

- 15 males and 14 females died every 10 days
- 1 death due to accident occurred every 10 days
- 7 infant deaths occurred that year

17 MARRIAGES PER WEEK WERE SOLEMNIZED IN PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND:

- 2 were civil ceremonies and 15 were performed by religious representatives

- 13 were marriages where both parties were marrying for the first time
- 4 marriages occurred that year where both parties were teenagers
- 5 divorces have been pronounced

118 VITAL STATISTICS CERTIFICATES WERE ISSUED IN PEI PER WEEK:

- 90 birth certificates
- 3 death certificates
- 8 marriage certificates
- 17 marriage licences

60 APPLICATIONS FOR LEGAL NAME CHANGES WERE REGISTERED IN PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND FOR THE YEAR

50 ADOPTIONS WERE REGISTERED FOR THE YEAR

Source: Prince Edward Island Vital Statistics

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