



Message From The Chairperson

The business of vital statistics has experienced significant change over the last few years, with that change has come challenge and opportunity for the Vital Statistics Council for Canada. Some of the challenges include: difference between jurisdictions in areas such as resources, levels of technology, reporting relationships for Council members, and variation in mandates, as well as differences of opinion about the roles and responsibilities of Council. Nevertheless the Council has recognized the opportunity within those challenges and in 1999 developed a five-year Strategic Business Plan that provided direction to Council. The plan identified several objectives that primarily focused on developing support mechanisms to member organizations as well as the development of national standards and practices that would be consistent with the autonomy of individual jurisdictions, while maintaining the integrity and promoting the importance of the national system.

In October, 2001 the Council held a workshop in Aylmer, Quebec to review the Strategic Business Plan and to evaluate and confirm our vision/direction and commitment to the national system of vital statistics. At the end of the workshop Council members agreed that our roles and responsibilities include: providing leadership in creating, promoting, and supporting an effective and efficient Canadian Vital Statistics System that integrates both vital record registration and certification, as well as the development of health and demographic statistics.

Record registration and certification have always been well identified as a key role of Vital Statistics programs. However, one area I believe that has not been as well appreciated is the importance of the Vital Statistics system to the development of the health information infrastructure and demographic statistics, both at the provincial/territorial and the national levels. Provincial/territorial Vital Statistics programs have been a source of epidemiological and demographic statistical data for many years. The collection of this data is required by all levels of government and has a wide variety of purposes including being used by researchers and health planners to determine the population's health and necessary health services. As well, the national system of vital statistics allows Statistics Canada to

fulfil its mandate with regards to the production of national statistics on mortality, fertility, and life expectancy as well as providing statistical research and analysis and population projections for all of Canada.

The Security Committee also took the opportunity during the workshop to meet and discuss the issue of security, especially after the tragic events of September 11. Security and fraud have been a concern of the Council for some time. For the past decade vital statistics organizations have focused on the need to increase accessibility to vital event records in an effort to meet the demands of increasing service to the public. The emphasis on service delivery and access has lead to an erosion of efforts related to fraud prevention and detection. Technology advances combined with lowered emphasis on security have provided greater opportunity for establishing false identity documents through the use of fraudulently obtained vital event records. The events of September 11, 2001 changed the appreciation and the understanding of the significance of these documents. Organizations that handle identification documents have begun to understand the significance of a birth certificate as the primary document that facilitates acquiring other identification documents. The Council believes the issue of security associated with vital statistics is a national issue that must be addressed at a national level. We believe we have a responsibility to develop national standards that adequately address current stakeholder concerns associated with the security and processes surrounding the issuance of birth certificates as well as other vital event documents and transactions. Therefore the Council has tasked the Security Committee with taking a lead role in the research and development of national standards to

In this issue:

Message From The Chairperson	1
Vital Statistics Records and Their Administration	2
Meet The Registrar: Brenda Andrews of Newfoundland and Labrador	2
Council Member Listing.....	4
Express Request Means Easier Access	4
Vital Statistics Council for Canada Annal Meeting.....	5

increase the level of security and confidence in vital event certificates and transactions. ♦

*Thelma Johnston, Chairperson
Vital Statistics Council for Canada*

Vital Statistics Records and Their Administration

*Beverly Billard, Senior Coordinator
Nova Scotia Vital Statistics*

The National Centre for Health Statistics (NCHS) hosted a workshop in Manchester, New Hampshire from April 23-26, 2001 on the maintenance and administration of vital statistics records. As the Senior Coordinator of Nova Scotia Vital Statistics, I was given the opportunity to attend the course along with 43 other local, state, and federal personnel involved with vital registration. The course focused on the proper management and administration of a vital statistics records system. The topics included:

- Techniques for collecting, editing, querying, and completing vital records;
- Processing and managing a vital records information system;
- Certification and verification procedures;
- Maintenance of a records system and guidelines for storage and retrieval;
- Protecting the confidentiality of vital records;
- Controlling fraudulent use of vital records;
- Interaction with the public; and
- Legislative and regulatory policies.

The exchange of information between jurisdictions through open discussions in both small groups and as an entire class was extremely beneficial. Sharing of legislation, policies, and experiences proved to be a real learning experience; it also illustrated both how similar and yet different the Canadian and United States systems are.

Nova Scotia Vital Statistics hopes to have a full electronic registry by 2005. The section of the course dealing with electronic registration was therefore particularly interesting and relevant. At present, approximately 90 percent of live births are registered electronically in the United States. Data are entered directly by hospitals into the Electronic Birth Certificate (EBC), and transmitted to state registration offices. States are developing systems in which funeral directors and physicians complete the

death certificate electronically instead of using the traditional paper record. The state of New Hampshire made a presentation on their electronic death registration processes and demonstrated their computer system. New Hampshire currently appears to be leading the way, both technologically and in other vital statistics program areas.

The Registrar and Director of Vital Statistics for New York City also gave a very interesting presentation on that city's Vital Statistics office. It was daunting to imagine such a large operation, although, regardless of size, many of the issues we deal with are similar. New York City has its own registry that operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Every funeral director must go to the one central location in downtown New York with a completed and certified death registration before a burial permit will be issued for the deceased. While this is a great way to guarantee receiving death information on the most timely basis, it would be impractical for many other jurisdictions. Interestingly, the registry's busiest time is during the late night hours because of reduced traffic and better parking. It really is the city that never sleeps.

One of the key lessons of the workshop was that data quality is important in every aspect of vital records and vital statistics, and that there needs to be a particular emphasis on obtaining complete and accurate information from information providers such as funeral directors and medical certifiers of death. It is essential that proper techniques for collecting, editing, querying, and completing vital records are closely monitored and assessed on a regular basis. Processing and managing a vital records information system is a complex and challenging task, from the initial data collection to the utilization of the data for statistical purposes. The opportunity to share ideas and methodologies for effectively managing such a system was certainly beneficial to all participants of this workshop. ♦

Meet The Registrar: Brenda Andrews of Newfoundland and Labrador

The old phrase What's in a name? seems ironically apt for Brenda Andrews these days—the Registrar General who has recorded many tens of thousands of names is looking on as her province is itself in the final stages of being rechristened “Newfoundland and Labrador.” “This is a symbolic

but important step in recognizing the vital contribution of Labradorians to our society and ensuring that provincial, national and international recognition is provided to both geographical regions of our province,” says Brenda. “The name change formally recognizes the close ties that have always existed between Labrador and Newfoundland.” The House of Commons has already approved the necessary constitutional amendment which is now awaiting endorsement by the Governor General. “Anyone born in Labrador was automatically considered to be from Newfoundland anyway,” says this Registrar in a softly lilting voice. “I guess the only real difference is that we’re going to have to print all new certificates to reflect the change.”

When not distracted by her own province going through a change-of-name process, Brenda oversees the registration of many thousands of more typical vital events: approximately 5,000 births, 4,500 deaths, and 3,500 marriages are recorded annually on “the Rock” and in Labrador. As is the case with some of the smaller jurisdictions, their medical coding of deaths is done for them by Statistics Canada back in Ottawa.



There are 14 full-time permanent staff working in the Vital Statistics head office in St. John’s, which since 1996 has been part of the Government Service Centres branch of the Department of Government Services and Lands. This branch’s broad mandate embraces Vital Statistics, Motor Registration, and the operation of the province’s Government Services Centres. “There are

approximately a dozen regional and sub-offices that, among other things, deliver Vital Statistics certification and licensing services to the residents of our province,” says Brenda. “The branch’s customer service staff serve as our agents in smaller centres and in rural areas.”

According to Brenda, perhaps the biggest impending issue for her department is the new adoption legislation that has been introduced into the House of Assembly but has not yet been proclaimed. As a result of this liberalizing initiative, both birth parents and adoptees will be able to apply to Vital Statistics for birth documents that were previously sealed. Safeguards will be taken to respect promises of confidentiality for adoptions that have occurred in the past. “If the experience of other provinces such as British Columbia that have adopted similar legislation is anything to go by, this will have a significant impact on Vital Statistics,” she notes.

Of similar import is the development of a new *Vital Statistics Act* for the province, insofar as the current one is, admits the Registrar, “a bit antiquated and is silent on certain important issues such as naming and entitlement.” While the current system has served the province well in the past, there is a recognition that it is time to move forward with the development of new legislation that will modernize registration procedures and place more focus on issues such as privacy and confidentiality, timeliness of reporting, and effective service delivery.

Another high priority relates to some of the indirect fallout that Vital Statistics offices all over Canada are experiencing as a result of the horrifying attack on the World Trade Center on September 11. “Security associated with vital event transactions and documents has always been a high priority for Vital Statistics offices,” says Brenda. “However, as a result of the events of September 11, there has been an increased emphasis by a wide variety of stakeholders on border security and concerns have been raised about identification documents in general and the security associated with them. The Vital Statistics Council for Canada, composed of representatives from each province and territory, is taking a lead role in the development of national standards with respect to the issuance of birth certificate and vital event transactions with a view to increasing security and reducing fraud,” she adds. “We are all reviewing procedures and enhancing guarantees to ensure the integrity of our records and documents.”

Adding further to the daily challenges of running her office is ongoing enhancement of a computer

infrastructure that has leapfrogged from an amusingly quaint “cardbox” system to one based on Oracle technology. “We have the technology,” says Brenda with a chuckle, “and we are working diligently to refine our system to more fully meet our requirements.” At present, records of births have been retroactively loaded as far back as 1946, with deaths only going back till 1999. It isn’t yet known to what extent all existing data will be backfilled onto the Oracle system.

A 30-year veteran of government service who “worked her way up the ranks” in the Ministry of Health to become Registrar General a decade ago, this hard-working mother of two makes the happy boast that she has yet to find her job boring. “Even after 10 years there’s something new to deal with every single day ... the work is all about variety and challenge and new things to learn,” she states. “Plus you get to see the personal side of people’s lives—you’re involved from birth to death and all the way in between.” ♦

Express Request Means Easier Access

*Elizabeth Crowley Meagher, Deputy Registrar General,
Nova Scotia Vital Statistics*

Nova Scotia Vital Statistics has just begun providing on-line access to make things easier for the thousands of people who request birth, death and marriage certificates each year.

The Vital Statistics On-Line Express Service became available May 15, 2001 and can be accessed at www.gov.ns.ca/snsmr/vstat. It offers a quick, convenient way to request and pay for birth, death, and marriage certificates from the Nova Scotia Registry of Vital Statistics. These services can be accessed via any computer with an Internet connection, including from homes, offices, and libraries.

Offering on-line application for certificates provides customers with a convenient alternative to obtaining certificates in person or by mail. Information needed for passports, pensions, name changes, and the administration of estates can now be electronically requested from anywhere in the country, or the world.

Each month, Nova Scotia’s Vital Statistics office receives over 4,200 requests. Until we added the on-line option, 70 percent of these requests were by mail, with the remaining 30 percent being handled in person at the downtown Halifax location. In the first three days of operation the on-line service handled an impressive 10 percent of all requests for birth, death, and marriage certificates.

On-line access is particularly useful for persons living outside the province—which represents 35 percent of our total requests. And by providing this on-line service, Vital Statistics’ doors are now “virtually” open for business 24 hours a day, seven days a week. ♦

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Vital Statistics Council for Canada Annual Meeting

What: The Vital Statistics Council for Canada 2002 Meeting with Representatives from Provincial/Territorial Vital Statistics Agencies, Statistics Canada, NAPHSIS and NCHS

When: June 17-20, 2002

Where: Ottawa, Ontario

Organizations that wish to make a presentation to the Council at this meeting should address their requests no later than March 31, 2002 to:

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