



VITAL STATISTICS COUNCIL FOR CANADA

Message From The Chairperson Elect

Events at the 69th annual meeting of the National Association for Public Health and Information Systems (NAPHSIS) will be of interest to anyone professionally involved with the management of vital statistics. The Conference opened with a presentation by eight jurisdictions providing details on their successes in re-engineering various aspects of Vital Statistics organizations. The main themes involved issues that Vital Statistics jurisdictions faced after the devastating attack on September 11, and the responses this inspired in various state agencies.

The 9/11 attack and the related plane crash that occurred shortly afterwards directly affected several states: New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. The Pentagon disaster required the Vital Statistics office to work with the military. Insofar as their personnel were not familiar with regular death recording procedures, the registration process encountered many difficulties. In Pennsylvania, even though Vital Statistics had a disaster plan in place, they were challenged when police officials were not prepared to support the presumption-of-death process. And in New York, the Vital Statistics office was a mere 10 blocks from the attack, which put them in the so-called "frozen zone." Their personnel thus faced a daunting challenge: coping with a registration process that involved processing a massive loss of life while simultaneously re-establishing their office in a different location. During this undertaking, they also instituted efforts to prevent fraud and maintain data quality.

After a speaker from the New York Medical Examiner's office presented details of the procedures undertaken to identify human remains, the remainder of the meeting focused on re-engineering the Vital Statistics processes at the state level. Many of these speakers recommended that the states collaborate to develop a model that can be used by all states in building their systems. They suggested that NAPHSIS build generic models and vendors be allowed to customize these generic models for each state. The NAPHSIS organization is taking the lead in developing the framework for generic re-engineering models.

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has undertaken a partnership with Vital Statistics offices. They are supporting electronic death registration to obtain death records more quickly; they also want

the development of a query system to allow SSA to access vital records for verification of information that they have been given by clients. The SSA has offered Vital Statistics offices support to complete their re-engineering projects. Two states are piloting this SSA link. Most states have not determined how they will allow SSA to access their records. They will only provide confirmations. Neither the SSA nor the states have completed funding agreements. They are recommending a system similar to our proposed National Routing System to move data between jurisdictions. Currently, the SSA does not terminate benefits without a second confirmation of death. They are working toward reliance on Vital Statistics records exclusively when they implement a new system.

In yet another consequence of the 9/11 attack, a session on the presumptive death laws of various states was presented. New York was required to undertake a process to register deaths under presumption-of-death procedures. Other states such as Kansas and Alaska already have such a law in place and/or are making immediate changes. New York's procedures are outlined on their Web site.

A session on fraud and security featured British Columbia's Andrew McBride, who presented an overview of Canadian initiatives to improve security. American security issues were more complex, insofar as their Immigration Department is coordinating a task force on the standardization of birth certificates. Since there are so many issuing jurisdictions, there can be great difficulty in identifying fraudulent documents. The standards put out by the federal government will include direction on contents of certificates, issuing standards, chain of custody of documents, and the type of paper that will be acceptable. Initial contact

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for an American passport is undertaken through other government offices and it is imperative that the Passport Office has access to verify identification. A law will provide benefits only to the states that have complied with the directives.

The U.S. is contemplating an initiative similar to our proposed Routing System. Before the project proceeds past the pilot stage, both the federal and state governments want to determine the amount of productivity gain and also which organization will be the beneficiary. They have not yet identified how the hub will be operated or funded. The funding will be dependent on the productivity gains. They are also examining whether other organizations should be allowed to utilize the system. It was suggested that the usual “user fee” funding mechanisms may not be ideal.

The last sessions were presentations on re-engineering. Representatives from Georgia, Florida, and Missouri discussed their re-engineering projects. Of particular interest was the suggestion that NAPHSIS create modules that would be usable by all organizations. Participants agreed that central help with tendering and system design would significantly decrease costs for all jurisdictions undertaking a re-engineering program.

Note: Most presentations made at the meeting can be accessed at the NAPHSIS web site: www.naphsis.org ♦

*Caroline Kaus, Director/CEO
Manitoba Vital Statistics Agency
Co-Chair Elect*

Meet The Registrar: Caroline Kaus of Manitoba

“We’re in the middle of the country, we’re mid-sized ... I guess it’s safe to say that Manitoba is a middle-of-the-road kind of province,” admits Caroline Kaus, director and CEO of the Vital Statistics Agency. That same claim for blandness certainly can’t be made for her department itself, which is categorized as a Special Operating Agency (SOA) and thus has a unique relationship with the provincial government.

“Once a year we negotiate our terms of business with the government, which gives us more delegated authority. Essentially we have more freedom to operate than a typical line department with respect to financial planning matters,” she explains. “In fact, we’ve had inquiries from vital statistics offices all

over the world about our status.” Her department was the second-ever SOA to be designated in Manitoba, in 1994; currently there are 17 such agencies at work in the province.

With approximately 1,160,000 citizens, Manitoba sees about 31,000 registrations annually. Births lead with 15,000 registered events, followed by 9,500 deaths and 6,500 marriages. “Winnipeg excepted, we have a really dispersed population, yet there are good mechanisms and contacts within the medical system to help us with event registration,” says Caroline. “The right people are in place and they perform very



efficiently.” The Agency itself employs nearly 40 persons, several of whom are part-time.

Even though Manitoba’s population is small enough that they only need four staff to key in their registrations—which originate on paper, and are then replicated digitally—there is a move to extend the Agency’s electronic reach. “It’s inevitable that we will move towards on-line entry from data providers such as hospitals and funeral directors,” says Caroline. “Not only is it the way the world is going, but it means we will get our data much more quickly.” Although there are no plans for any

electronic commerce initiatives, the Agency expects to be putting its older records up on the Web; all births over 100 years, marriages over 80 years, and deaths over 70 years will soon be available electronically to any interested persons.

“We’re also right in the middle of looking into whether to become involved with electronic ID procedures,” notes Caroline. “Anyone who does business with the government over the Internet needs to be able to prove who they are, and it would be logical for us to be a nexus for brokering that kind of an ID service,” she says. “However, that would inevitably represent an order-of-magnitude increase relative to the volume of work that our Agency is presently responsible for.”

Caroline was trained both as an accountant and a business-focused risk manager, and her résumé lists many years working mostly for crown corporations and the federal government. In 1994 she joined Manitoba’s Vital Statistics as their financial adviser; less than a year later the director resigned and Caroline moved into the corner office — with no plans on leaving any time soon. “You’d think that just handling vital events would get boring, but I’ve worked at a *lot* of jobs and yet I continue to be fascinated by the variety of issues that confront me here at Vital Statistics,” she enthuses. “First off, I really enjoy having access to health research,” she says. “And from putting in a brand new computer system to dealing with the impact of legislation involving same-sex marriages or surrogate motherhood, you face new things on a continual basis,” adds Caroline. “And all that kind of social legislation reflects how our attitudes are changing ... essentially it’s a mirror that shows us what contemporary society thinks and feels.”

When not in the office, Caroline’s so-called “spare time” mostly consists of an ongoing struggle to build a second home up at the northern edge of Lake Manitoba, nearly three hours north of Winnipeg. Working alongside her geologist-husband — they’re both self-confessed construction novices — has been an eye-opener in all that can go wrong on a project of such complexity. “And we’re still not sure if this is meant to be a just summer retreat or else a retirement home some day,” laughs Caroline. “Even though I love cross-country skiing and all that, the winters up there would be long and bleak and lonely,” she admits. “I suspect my husband would prefer the beaches and bougainvillea of Mexico.”♦

Nova Scotia Vital Statistics Introduces Domestic Partnership Registry

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

On June 4, 2001, Nova Scotia Vital Statistics introduced a Domestic Partnership Registry. Under amendments to the *Vital Statistics Act*, two persons living in a conjugal relationship may now file a declaration with Vital Statistics to register their domestic partnership.

By registering their partnership, the parties acquire many of the same benefits and obligations as a married couple, such as pension benefits and the division of assets at separation or death.

The legislation was passed in response to two court decisions. *M. vs. H.*, a Supreme Court of Canada decision, found that spousal support provisions that apply to married and heterosexual common-law couples must be extended to same-sex common-law couples; and a Nova Scotia Court of Appeals decision that found that the *Matrimonial Properties Act*, which defines “spouse” as a married individual, discriminates against common-law couples and contravenes the Charter.

The amendments to the *Vital Statistics Act* also established a number of criteria both parties must meet to file a “domestic partners” declaration. These include:

- each person must be over the age of majority (19 years of age);
- neither person can be married;
- neither person can be party to an existing domestic partnership; and,
- each person must be ordinarily resident or a property owner in Nova Scotia on the date of registration.

The *Vital Statistics Act* also stipulates that a partnership is terminated at the time that any of the following events or conditions is met:

- both partners file a Statement of Termination with Vital Statistics;
- both partners enter into a separation agreement pursuant to the *Maintenance and Custody Act*;
- both partners live apart for at least one year and one partner files an affidavit with Vital Statistics to register the termination; or,
- one partner marries a third party.

Legal proof that a domestic partnership is registered is available via short-form certificates that reflect the names of the domestic partners, the date of registration, and registration number. Certified copies of the registrations are also available.

Individuals can obtain proof that their domestic partnership is ended by registering the termination with Vital Statistics and applying for a certificate of domestic partnership indicating the effective date of the termination.

The introduction of this service brought national media attention to Nova Scotia as the first Canadian jurisdiction to pass legislation enabling persons in domestic partnerships to legally register their unions. Fifteen domestic partnerships were registered in the first 10 days that the service was available.

Further information on domestic partnership registrations and certificates is available on the Nova Scotia Vital Statistics web site at <http://www.gov.ns.ca/snsmr/vstat>. ♦

Statistics Canada / NCHS Interchange

*Leslie Geran,
Senior Analyst, Statistics Canada*

Since 1999, staff members from Statistics Canada's Health Statistics Division have met each year with counterparts from the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) in a meeting known as the Interchange. This annual meeting is a forum for the discussion of common concerns and issues in collecting health data.

Interchange 2001 was originally scheduled for mid-September, but was moved to December because of the terrorist attacks in the United States. Eleven Statistics Canada (STC) staff, including Gary Catlin, Ghislaine Villeneuve, and Leslie Geran of the Vital and Cancer Statistics Section, and Martha Fair from the Occupational and Environmental Health Research Section, attended the meetings in Hyattsville, Maryland. Dr. Harry Rosenberg, who presented the ICD-10 training course for analysts in Ottawa in June of 2000, also attended. The presentations and discussions lasted two full days and covered a wide variety of topics on administrative and survey data.

In terms of vital statistics data, NCHS staff are busy assisting American states in implementing new birth and death certificates. The new birth certificate has an ambitious list of questions, including a list of risk factors in the pregnancy such as cigarette smoking,

characteristics of labour and delivery, and congenital anomalies of the newborn. Specifications for both paper-based and electronic-based collection were produced by NCHS. States will adopt the new certificates over the next several years. On the mortality side, ICD-10 for 1999 U.S. data was introduced, and NCHS noted that there was very little public reaction to the change.

STC participants were particularly interested in NCHS public-use data files on vital statistics, insofar as STC has never produced a public-use file for vital statistics. NCHS has a number of files available for researchers, including births, deaths, a multiple cause-of-death file, a multiple birth file which matches twins and triplets, and a name file of frequencies for first and last names compiled by the National Death Index. This latter file is used by researchers doing linkage studies.

Topics on security and the after-effects of the terrorist attacks were also discussed. NCHS had some concern about how the anti-terrorism provisions might affect the confidentiality of survey respondents. NCHS staff has also developed ICD-10 codes for use with deaths from the terrorist attacks.

In addition to vital statistics data, other topics discussed included large-population health surveys, and a new proposal for a joint U.S./Canada health survey. The aim of the survey is to collect health data on our two populations by using the same wording for questions. This joint project has given rise to a lot of international interest, and during the discussion we were joined by staff from the World Health Organization (W.H.O.) in Geneva by teleconference, and from Australia by telephone. ♦

Newfoundland Gets a Name Change

*Brenda Andrews, Registrar General,
Newfoundland and Labrador Vital Statistics*

On December 6, 2001, Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson proclaimed a constitutional amendment officially changing the name of the province of Newfoundland to the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Labrador has a unique geography, history, and culture, yet it has always been intertwined with Newfoundland. It is a vital and important part of

this province and Newfoundlanders have long recognized and appreciated the enormous contributions that Labrador and its people have made to Newfoundland society. However, historically, the terms of union with Canada provided that the province be called Newfoundland.

The *Labrador Act* (1964) provided for official recognition of Labrador in the provincial Coat of Arms. For many years there was inconsistency since government was known as the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador but the province was officially designated as Newfoundland.

The people of Labrador had requested the name change for many years. In 1999 Government initiated the final steps in granting that request. The House of Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution to amend Term 1 of the terms of union to reflect the province's official name as Newfoundland and Labrador. This was followed by approval of the House of Commons and the Senate. In November, 2001, the Newfoundland and Labrador Act was introduced in the House of Assembly and came into force on the same day as the Constitutional amendment.

Names speak volumes — and the long wait is over! In recognition of their status as full and equal partners, Labradorians are now equally represented in our province's new name. This is a symbolic but important event that will promote and strengthen unity within our province.

The new name will now be reflected on all government documents and publications. Vital Statistics is currently awaiting delivery of certificates of birth, marriage, death, and change of name reflecting this name change. The new name is lengthier so a slightly smaller print size may be necessary. But, very soon now, all certificates issued will proudly proclaim the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. ♦

Ontario Toughens Birth Certificate Application Process

*Judi Hartman, Director and Deputy Registrar General
Vital Statistics of Ontario*

The rules for getting an Ontario birth certificate have changed significantly since September 11. One month after the terrorist attack, Consumer and Business Services' Minister Norman Sterling introduced the *Vital Statistics Statute Law Amendment Act (Security of Documents), 2001* which among other

things focused attention on the security/privacy mandate of Ontario's Office of the Registrar General.

In terms of impact on the general public, the application process for a birth certificate has been strengthened with new requirements for additional information about the birth registration (Ontario now requires 17 data elements instead of the previous seven). Applicants are also required to have a guarantor sign the application form attesting to the identity of the applicant (similar to a guarantor on a passport or name change application). (Please note that in 50 percent of all applications, the applicant is not the person named on the certificate but is that person's parent or legal guardian.) These two measures are designed to eliminate "tombstoning" — a common form of identity theft — by requesting additional information that is not likely to be found in a birth or death announcement or on a person's tombstone (such as the mother's residence at the time of the birth). The *Vital Statistics Statute Law Amendment Act (Security of Documents), 2001* also increased the penalties for offences committed under the provisions in the existing legislation. For example, any person who willfully provides false information is liable for a fine of not more than \$50,000 and two years imprisonment (corporations are liable for fines up to \$250,000).

Individuals are also required by law to report any lost, stolen, destroyed, or found birth certificate immediately. This new requirement has resulted in over 18,000 birth certificates being reported lost/stolen in the first four months of operation!

Ontario has also launched an aggressive public education campaign to advise members of the general public of these new requirements and the other activities the government has undertaken to protect birth certificates. These include sharing information about birth certificates with other organizations such as the Canadian Passport Service.

Ontario was in the fortunate position of having had a full security audit conducted on its certificate issuance operations by the Ontario Provincial Police in the fall of 2000. This audit identified areas requiring strengthening and the Office of the Registrar General was more than halfway through implementation before September 11. Implementation of the remainder of the recommendations was expected to be completed by March 31, 2002.

Recognizing that security is not static and that the province must continue to develop and implement

new measures to keep identity theft at bay, Ontario is continuing to work with other members of the identification community and law enforcement agencies on next-generation security measures. ♦

The Use of Vital Statistics Mortality Data by the Canadian Cancer Registry

*Michel Cormier,
Statistics Canada*

The Canadian Cancer Registry (CCR) is a dynamic, patient-oriented database that is housed and maintained at Statistics Canada; it lists all Canadian residents diagnosed with cancer from 1992 onwards. The CCR replaces the event-oriented National Cancer Incidence Reporting System (NCIRS) established in 1969. Provincial and territorial cancer registries supply information annually to Statistics Canada on new patients and new tumours.

The data contained on the CCR database are used by several divisions at Statistics Canada, including the Social and Economic Division and the Occupational and Environmental Health Section. Other users include Health Canada, provincial departments of health, the National Cancer Institute of Canada, the Canadian Cancer Society, pharmaceutical companies, medical and health researchers, and the general public. The information is used for descriptive and analytic epidemiological studies that can be applied to identifying risk factors for specific cancers; planning, monitoring, and evaluating a broad range of cancer control programs (e.g., screening); and supporting health services and economic research and planning.

The CCR system has three modules: Core Edit, Internal Record Linkage, and Death Clearance. The Core Edit module builds and maintains the registry. The Internal Record Linkage module assures that the CCR is truly a person-based file, with only one record for each patient diagnosed with cancer. Finally, the Death Clearance module completes the information on cancer patients by furnishing the official date and cause of their death. The latter function is done annually by direct match and probabilistic linkage of patient records to death registrations on the Canadian Mortality Data Base (CMDDB) which is created at Statistics Canada from the annual files of the Canadian Vital Statistics Data Base.

Why is Death Clearance important for the CCR? Firstly it improves the completeness and quality of reported death and other demographic information, including date, location, and cause of death, sex, and date and place of birth. It also facilitates epidemiological studies using information on the cause of death and permits the calculation of survival rates for cancer patients. Finally, it assists provincial and territorial cancer registries in performing active follow-up for research purposes.

Why is Death Clearance important for Canadians in general? Its importance lies in the fact that cancer is the leading cause of premature death in Canada and is responsible for almost 30 percent of all potential years of life lost. Based on death information from the Canadian Cancer Registry and the Canadian Vital Statistics Data Base, Health Canada estimates that 66,200 Canadian will die from cancer in 2002. ♦

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