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Health officials aim to prevent 2,400 deaths; Eastern Ontario health network plans to bombard residents with one message -- live healthy -- to meet ambitious goal

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Eastern Ontario health officials have set an ambitious goal: to prevent 2,400 unnecessary heart and stroke deaths every year.

They believe they can get there with a package of six initiatives ranging from ensuring that high blood pressure is properly managed, to the world's first program to see that every patient admitted to hospital is offered access to a smoking cessation program.

People will be encouraged to eat better, exercise more and be aware of Type 2 diabetes and high cholesterol. In the next five years, Ottawa-area residents of all ages will be getting the entire range of messages at work and in schools, doctors' offices and hospitals.

In short, there will be no way to avoid them.

It's not rocket science, but the public has to be constantly bombarded to move knowledge to attitude to a change of behaviour, said Dr. Robert Cushman, CEO of the Champlain Local Health Integration Network, which covers most of Eastern Ontario.

"It's a whole multiplier effect," he said. "While it is complex, our job is to have a comprehensive message so people bump up against it at every turn."

Researchers believe about 80 per cent of cardiovascular deaths are preventable. In Eastern Ontario, that's about 2,400 preventable deaths a year, said Dr. Andrew Pipe, chairman of the Champlain Cardiovascular Disease Prevention Network.

On the face of it, Ottawa does well compared to the national average when it comes to heart disease and reducing the behaviours that cause it.

For example, the national average death rate due to cardiovascular disease is 201 cardiovascular deaths for every 100,000 people. In Ottawa, that rate is 187 deaths for every 200,000 people. Across Canada, 47 per cent admit to being physically inactive, compared to 42 per cent in the Champlain region.

But health officials also know that the rural counties in the region are cardiovascular disease "hot spots."

In Renfrew county, for example, there are 257 cardiovascular deaths for every 100,000 people.

About 13 per cent of Ottawa residents smoke on a daily basis compared to the national average of 19 per cent. But in Leeds, Grenville and Lanark, that

number is 23 per cent and it's 22 per cent in Renfrew.

Across Canada, 33 per cent are overweight and 16 are obese, compared to 32 per cent overweight and 12 per cent obese in the Ottawa. In the eastern counties, which include Cornwall and the Alexandria area, 39 per cent are overweight and 19 per cent are obese.

"We have some fairly significant disparities in the region, said Dr. Pipe.

Setting ambitious goals to reduce preventable cardiovascular deaths is not a new approach. For example, one county in Finland with particularly high numbers of preventable deaths set out with a 30-year plan to turn it around, said Dr. Cushman. And the entire city of Philadelphia embarked on a weight-reduction program.

But Dr. Cushman said the Champlain region's plan is the most comprehensive and sophisticated one out there so far. It helps that there are only about 1.2 million people in the region.

Dr. Pipe said obesity will be a particularly hard pattern to break, mostly because of the easy availability of fast food, and the fact that many families can't afford healthier choices.

"I think some of the most difficult behaviours are around eating. Obesity is skyrocketing, especially among children."

The Champlain region has already had some success with a program aimed at the area's most resistant smokers.

The smoker identification program, now available at all 19 hospitals in the region, was a world first. Smokers are identified as soon as they are admitted, and are offered a place in a smoking cessation program.

Since last April, the program has been offered to 3,000 smokers, Dr. Pipe said.

He expects there will be other benefits to the region's new six-pronged approach.

"If you address cardiovascular health factors, you address other conditions like diabetes and osteoporosis," he said. "Hopefully, it will result in a transformation."

Drug manufacturer Pfizer has already pledged \$2.4 million to the program, and health officials are looking for another \$9 million. To do that, the region has had to provide a "well-developed business case" he said.

At only a few dollars for every resident of Eastern Ontario, it will be money well-spent, said Dr. Pipe.