

BC COVID-19

STRATEGIC RESEARCH
ADVISORY COMMITTEE

BC COVID-19 STRATEGIC RESEARCH ADVISORY COMMITTEE

SUMMARY REPORT

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Secretariat



Contents

1.0 Introduction 2

2.0 SRAC Work – Key Deliverables..... 2

 Advice to the MoH and the PHO..... 2

 COVID-19 research coordination 3

 Provincial COVID-19 research frameworks 3

 SRAC working groups 3

 BC COVID-19 knowledge translation plan update 5

 Coordination of research resources and infrastructure to support COVID-19 research..... 6

3.0 Conclusion and Reflections..... 6

Appendix 1: Links to Appendices 9

1.0 Introduction

The BC COVID-19 Strategic Research Advisory Committee (SRAC) was established at the request of the BC Ministry of Health at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its purpose was to serve as a bridge between and among the Provincial Health Officer, government decision-makers and the health research community across the province. Supported by Michael Smith Health Research BC (Health Research BC), SRAC's intent is to support the production and use of timely and relevant research evidence that could inform public health measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. The full terms of reference for SRAC can be found in Appendix A, and a list of members in Appendix B.

As we move past the acute stage of pandemic response and therefore SRAC's work winds down, this report summarizes, for government and the research community, SRAC's work from inception in March of 2020 through summer 2022 and provides links to reports on specific deliverables. The report is not an evaluation of SRAC's work or the research response to the pandemic (see Appendix C for an early rapid review of the response commissioned by Health Research BC at the request of the BC Ministry of Health). The report ends, however, with a short section on SRAC members' high-level reflections on their work and some considerations for moving forward.

2.0 SRAC Work – Key Deliverables

Per the terms of reference for SRAC:

The committee has the responsibility to advise on:

- The understanding of provincial COVID-19 research needs and questions (including those across the healthcare system) as they are being defined
- The development of provincial COVID-19 research frameworks as necessary
- The identification of emerging research issues and responses
- The coordination of research resources and infrastructure to support COVID-19 research
- The development and implementation of a provincial knowledge translation strategy to support the translation of COVID-19 research evidence into practice

Advice to the MoH and the PHO

SRAC is an independent advisory committee that reports to the BC Ministry of Health (MoH) Associate Deputy Minister (ADM) and the Public Health Officer (PHO) through

the two co-chairs (Bev Holmes, CEO of Michael Smith Health Research BC and David Patrick, director of research, BC Centre for Disease Control). Throughout the term of SRAC, the SRAC co-chairs had regular meetings with the ADM, PHO and other MoH leaders to review key deliverables including advice and recommendations from SRAC working groups. A standing agenda item for these meetings discussed what advice SRAC could provide within the scope of their mandate to support the PHO/MoH.

COVID-19 research coordination

SRAC worked with a range of stakeholders to identify knowledge gaps and advise on COVID-19 research priorities. For example, SRAC contributed to the development of the “Research is Care and Care is Research” document produced by the COVID-19 Clinical Research Coordination Initiative and the “Rapid Review of the Coordination of the COVID-19 Provincial Research Response” (Appendix C) commissioned by Michael Smith Health Research BC, and regularly tabled challenges and opportunities surfaced during the provincial research response at the MoH/PHO meetings.

Provincial COVID-19 research frameworks

SRAC authored two BC COVID-19 research framework documents that identified COVID-19 knowledge gaps and research priorities. The frameworks were developed based on input and feedback from a wide variety of stakeholders. A key goal was to prioritize high quality research to help control, mitigate and eliminate the harmful effects of COVID-19 related disease and their impact on the people of BC:

- BC COVID-19 Strategic Research Framework: An Evolving Guide for Decision-Makers and Researchers (Issue 1- April 2020) (Appendix D)
- BC COVID-19 Strategic Research Framework: An Evolving Guide for Decision-Makers and Researchers – Adaptive Research Response (Issue 2 – December 2020) (Appendix E)

SRAC working groups

A number of working groups were formed to review specific issues or challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic experience in British Columbia. These working groups were led by members of SRAC and purposefully engaged a wide range of external, province-wide stakeholders in their discussions. The SRAC working groups produced reports that captured the focus of their work and recommendations for consideration.

Long-Term Care Working Group

The Long-Term Care (LTC) Working Group, led by SRAC member Kelli Stajduhar, Professor, School of Nursing, University of Victoria, was established to advise on LTC

research in BC in the context of COVID-19. Their report “Building a Knowledge Enterprise for Long-term Care in British Columbia” (Appendix F) summarizes key research priorities related to the vulnerability of LTC residents and the care staff and families who support them and identifies important research questions to be addressed relative to each priority. Priority areas include: resident wellbeing; addressing broader LTC challenges in relation to learning from a pandemic; interpretation and implementation of policy related to the pandemic; health and human resources impact; implementing, evaluating and monitoring best practice for scale-up of innovation; and risk communication. The report also notes key system challenges (systemic and structural) related to research capacity in LTC in BC that, if unaddressed, will impede the development of new evidence for LTC and its translation into policy and practice.

Public Communications Working Group

The Public Communications Working Group was led by SRAC members Tania Bubela, Dean of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University and co-chair Bev Holmes. This working group organized a BC COVID-19 Vaccine Communications Collaboration and Networking Workshop for health communications professionals and communications researchers involved in supporting the COVID-19 vaccine rollout in British Columbia. The goals of the workshop were to understand strengths and challenges in communicating the COVID-19 vaccine rollout in BC, the evidence supporting communications practitioners in the vaccine rollout, relationship building among and between communications practitioners and communications researchers, and identification of new research that could support practitioners in developing equitable, culturally safe and appropriate approaches to COVID-19 vaccine communications across BC. Two reports were produced: a summary of the workshop findings and key takeaways (Appendix G), and a summary of the workshop proceedings including links to resources and plenary recordings (Appendix H). This group’s work led to a dialogue between public health officials and researchers through SFU’s Centre for Dialogue, co-hosted by SFU’s Faculty of Health Sciences, the BC Centre for Disease Control Foundation for Public Health, and Health Research BC. At the time of writing this report, next steps from the dialogue are to be determined.

School Health Working Group

The School Health Working Group included SRAC members Perry Kendall (Co-Interim Executive Director, BC Centre for Substance Use) and Victoria Schuckel (Executive Director, Research and Technology, BC Ministry of Health). The purpose of the School Health Working Group was to provide advice on how to better support the coordination of surveillance, research and practice in school health of children during the current and future pandemics. The working group produced a submission titled “School Health Research in BC” that recommended COVID-19 research resources should be allocated to develop a vision and plan for an ongoing integrated school health research and practice network for BC, including a focus on the social and other determinants of health (Appendix I). The School Working Group was also involved in a series of meetings with

stakeholders to review how to move forward with a number of their recommendations including organizing a school/child health symposium to review related research issues and opportunities identified during the pandemic.

Vaccine Evaluation and Research Group

The Vaccine Evaluation and Research Group (VERG) was led by SRAC co-chair David Patrick. The working group was constituted formally to provide the COVID-19 Vaccine Planning and Operations Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) up-to-date information and advice towards the planning of COVID-19 immunization programs in BC. The working group produced two reports, “Knowledge Gaps Relevant to COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout in BC” (January, 2021) (Appendix J) and the “Vaccine Evaluation and Research Group Summary Report” (March, 2022) (Appendix K). The former report outlines the results of a rapid gap analysis to determine critical questions research must answer to optimize the safety, speed and impact of a COVID-19 vaccine program rollout. Six themes and associated research questions were identified related to: vaccine effectiveness – preventing illness and infection; vaccine effectiveness – reducing transmission; vaccine immunogenicity; monitoring for adverse effects; concerns of British Columbians; and equitable access. The latter report includes examples of the working group’s activities (e.g. work they conducted that led to the immediate funding of vaccine research studies up to \$2M and a partnership with the Canadian Immunity Task Force, which relieved BC of approximately half the cost of these studies). In early 2022, the working group stood down but maintains informal contact on emerging developments.

Indigenous-led Research Working Group

Indigenous-led research was identified as a focus by SRAC. In light of other urgent priorities faced by Indigenous peoples and communities, this important working group was not realized. A short report in Appendix L, by SRAC member Jeff Reading (Professor, Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University), provides an overview of some of the successes and challenges related to supporting Indigenous communities in Canada through research.

BC COVID-19 knowledge translation plan update

The knowledge translation activities led by Health Research BC and supported by SRAC, aimed to support BC’s research response to the pandemic and to facilitate use of COVID-19-related evidence in policy and practice. A copy of “BC’s research response to COVID-19: Increasing knowledge translation efforts – Update” report can be found in Appendix M.

Coordination of research resources and infrastructure to support COVID-19 research

SRAC was actively involved in a number of COVID-19 research initiatives. Support included advice on research questions, meeting with stakeholders involved in the research and discussing preliminary findings. The following is a list of initiatives that SRAC supported.

Health Research BC COVID-19 Research Response Fund

Health Research BC launched a COVID-19 Research Response Fund for BC health researchers. Funding was awarded to twenty BC-led research projects designed to address immediate and emerging issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and to provide evidence for BC decision makers to support the public health response. SRAC provided advice on the focus of this funding opportunity. Appendix N is the executive summary of “Health Research BC’s COVID-19 Research Response Fund: Observations from end of award reports”.

Rapid SARS-CoV-2 Vaccine Research Initiative (2021)

Genome BC, Health Research BC, and the BC Centre for Disease Control Foundation for Public Health partnered to fund rapid response research initiatives that will have a direct impact on people in British Columbia during the COVID-19 pandemic. SRAC supported the initial discussions and objectives for this initiative. A copy of the “Rapid SARS-CoV-2 Vaccine Research Initiative in BC Interim Summary Report” can be found in Appendix O.

Rapid Review of the Coordination of the Provincial COVID-19 Research Response

At the request of the Ministry of Health, Health Research BC commissioned an early rapid review of the coordination of the COVID-19 research response (Appendix C). SRAC provided feedback on this review. The rapid review findings revealed that while some important steps were made towards the coordination of the provincial COVID-19 research response in BC including significant, collegial and voluntary efforts from many individuals and organizations, there was not an integrated and sustained provincial research response to the pandemic including knowledge translation and addressing significant barriers and issues related to ethics and privacy reviews for research. The review concluded that there is an opportunity for the province to critically reflect on the learnings from the pandemic to take steps to design a fit-for-purpose, integrated health research system capable of addressing BC’s current and future health challenges.

3.0 Conclusion and Reflections

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, SRAC met regularly to provide urgent advice on the COVID-19 research response. As the pandemic evolved, public health measures based on the best available and emerging data, as well as cross-provincial coordination

to expedite research ethics approvals, were implemented to accelerate an end to the pandemic and mitigate its effects. SRAC formed a number of working groups to discuss and identify key issues that remained to respond to the pandemic. Further, important lessons were learned about how research could better be funded, coordinated and communicated during a pandemic, and more broadly.

At its August 2022 meeting, SRAC members reflected on the committee's work and what it suggests for the future – both for research supporting emerging infectious disease responses and for evidence-based practice and policy more generally. Among the points discussed:

- There has been a great deal learned about the **health system's capacity** to undertake or be involved in important research, and to use the evidence productively. Actions taken since the pandemic – including a project to streamline research approvals by the Ministry of Health, and an environmental scan of health system research capacity by Health Research BC – are steps in the right direction. SRAC notes the important difference between the dissemination of evidence, and the use of evidence in practice, and encourages attention to and support for the latter.
- We should look to **optimize integration** of newly funded capacity at BCCDC Foundation and the Pacific Institute on Pathogens, Pandemics and Society (PIPP) with more longstanding public health efforts in the Health Authorities, Ministry and at BCCDC.
- The **challenge of finding and using research evidence** is not limited to the health system – it affects public health, communities, individuals and researchers themselves. SRAC discussed the possibility of infrastructure in the form of a 'societal observatory,' which could monitor public opinion and support dialogue and priority setting with people and communities. Infrastructure in the form of a science table linked more closely to government would also be helpful for evidence-informed decision making. SRAC strongly believes a broader range of evidence – including social sciences and humanities – must be brought to bear during health emergencies, and ongoing to mitigate their impact.
- SRAC supports a clearer process for **procurement of research expertise** to inform policy and practice decisions. This process could be facilitated by a science table, but clear mandates and authorities related to research funding, production and use – missing during this pandemic – would help ensure evidence more directly influences decisions.
- Strong relationships – among people, teams and institutions – have formed during the pandemic, demonstrating what can be accomplished when people collaborate. Attention to **building relationships** among stakeholders in government, the health system, academia, industry and communities – in non-pandemic times – will serve us

well during emergencies. They will also enable us to repair the damage caused by those emergencies, and take advantage of opportunities offered by them.

- Scientific progress – including debates among scientists and between scientists and public health officials – has played out in public in an unprecedented way. Many patients and members of the public are confused at best, mistrustful at worst. SRAC believes that scientists and the institutions of science face a challenge, but also a significant opportunity for **public trust-building**, through engagement, dialogue, and learning.

Given the unpredictable trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic, as at October 2022, SRAC continues to be available on an ad hoc basis to provide advice to the Province about research priorities; research funding; and coordination, dissemination and implementation related to research and the evidence it produces. Next steps for the committee as well as the above points will be discussed with the Ministry of Health in fall 2022.

Appendix 1: Links to Appendices

[Appendix A: SRAC Terms of Reference](#)

[Appendix B: SRAC Membership](#)

[Appendix C: Rapid Review of the Coordination of the Provincial COVID-19 Research Response](#)

[Appendix D: BC COVID-19 Strategic Research Framework: An Evolving Guide for Decision Makers and Researchers \(Issue 1 – April 2020\)](#)

[Appendix E: BC COVID-19 Strategic Research Framework: An Evolving Guide for Decision Makers and Researchers – Adaptive Research Response \(Issue 2 – December 2020\)](#)

[Appendix F: SRAC Long-term Care Working Group Report](#)

[Appendix G: SRAC Public Communications Working Group Report – Summary of the workshop findings and key takeaways](#)

[Appendix H: SRAC Public Communications Working Group Report – Summary of the workshop proceedings including links to resources and plenary recordings](#)

[Appendix I: SRAC School Health Working Group Report](#)

[Appendix J: SRAC Vaccine Evaluation and Research Working Group Report – Knowledge Gaps Relevant to COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout in BC \(January, 2021\)](#)

[Appendix K: SRAC Vaccine Evaluation and Research Working Group Report – Vaccine Evaluation and Research Group Summary Report \(March, 2022\)](#)

[Appendix L: An overview of the successes and challenges related to supporting Indigenous communities in Canada through research \(October, 2022\)](#)

[Appendix M: BC COVID-19 Knowledge Translation Plan Update](#)

[Appendix N: Health Research BC COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund Executive Summary](#)

[Appendix O: Rapid SARS-CoV-2 Vaccine Research Initiative Interim Executive Summary Report](#)