

January 2012

The Right Hon. Stephen Joseph Harper, P.C., M.P.  
Prime Minister of Canada  
Langevin Building  
80 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6

Dear Prime Minister Harper,

We, the undersigned national health organizations, are writing to urge the Government of Canada to demonstrate its leadership and influence in implementing a strong and meaningful plan to reduce the amount of sodium consumed by Canadians.

The average Canadian consumption of sodium is 3,400 mg/day, which is well above recommended levels. High sodium levels in food (largely added during food processing) cause almost one third of hypertension, or high blood pressure, a leading risk for premature death and disability. Hypertension is a major cause of heart disease (heart attack and heart failure), stroke and kidney failure and a major contributor to premature death, disability and health care costs in Canada. It is expected that 7.5 million Canadians will be diagnosed with hypertension in 2012, with an estimated 1100 new diagnoses per day.

We are pleased that the federal government stands by its commitment to meeting a target of 2300 mg/day average sodium intake by 2016, as recommended to you last year by the Sodium Working Group. We commend the actions that Health Canada has taken to address the issue of dietary sodium such as recent partnering in the development and testing of consumer sodium reduction messages. However, we believe that greater commitment and leadership is needed to ensure that the agreed-upon goal is met.

Prime Minister, your government has the proper levers to play a leadership role, which includes (1) consideration of regulatory measures to reduce sodium if voluntary targets are not met; (2) transparent monitoring and public reporting of industry's progress toward defined targets; (3) imposing restrictions on the commercial marketing of high-sodium foods to children; and (4) strengthening Canada's nutrition labelling requirements to clearly and simply showcase foods that are acceptable. We believe these measures are appropriate given the risk high sodium levels pose to the health of Canadians.

While we applaud the progress made with regards to sodium, we are concerned that recent federal decisions not to endorse the federal, provincial and territorial sodium implementation report, presented at the November 2011 Health Ministers Summit meeting, will be seen as a signal to the food processing industry and food service establishments that our national government is not serious about

the need to commit to the 2016, as well as interim, targets. The argument that the sodium implementation plan would fail to garner commitment from industry sends the clear message to Canadians that private interest takes precedence over food safety and their health and wellness. In developed countries, including Canada, reducing dietary sodium is one of the few cost-saving interventions to improve health. To this end, it is clear that the cost of fractional investment for re-tooling to lower sodium levels would create economic growth rather than impede it. Conservative estimates indicate an annual reduction of 14,000 deaths, 40,000 hospitalizations due to stroke, heart attack and heart failure and annual direct health cost savings of more than \$1.4 billion dollars by lowering sodium to recommended levels.

National government commitment to a comprehensive sodium reduction plan presents an opportunity to carry out the important role your government can, and should be, playing in informing the public of the progress, or lack thereof, in meeting our nation's sodium intake targets. Your government's commitment on this matter would further have the support of esteemed Canadian health organizations, over 18 of which endorsed a 2007 policy statement calling for government action to reduce sodium in the Canadian diet.

At a global level, both the World Health Organization and the United Nations have stressed the need for reduction in dietary sodium, with the WHO describing salt-reduction interventions as a 'best-buy' approach to improving health. Provincial and Territorial Ministers are also actively supportive of a strong federal response, and some P/T jurisdictions are already beginning to implement sodium reduction programs through education, public awareness campaigns, labelling and procurement guidelines

As respected Canadian health organizations, we urge the Government of Canada to demonstrate its leadership and its commitment to promoting the health of Canadians by declaring a narrow time frame for taking strong and significant measures to reduce sodium content in food to acceptable levels. The achievement of a coherent preventative health strategy will save both lives and dollars while sending a clear message to the people of Canada that their government cares.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and your officials to further engage on the issues and opportunities identified above.

**Correspondence on behalf of the signatories may be directed to:**

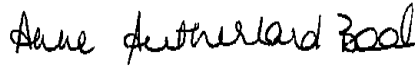
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**Encl:** Signature page; 2012 Facts Sheets on Dietary Sodium and Hypertension

Respectfully submitted by,



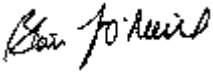
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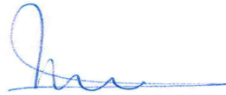
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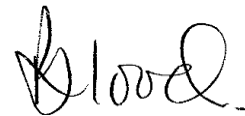
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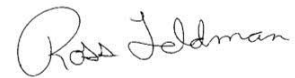
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