RESPONSE TO THE ROMANOW COMMISSION’S
“Building on Values: The Future of Health Care in Canada – Final Report”

Conclusions Drawn from alPHa’s Submission to Romanow (Aug. 2002):

1. Including public health in the definition of “insured health care services” within the Canada Health Act would help to ensure a sustainable and truly comprehensive health care system.

2. Canada’s health care system needs to be rebalanced toward promoting wellness and preventing illness. Public health is a sound investment in the health of citizens; health promotion and disease prevention must become the foundation of Medicare.

3. The federal government can lead the country to better health outcomes by developing a national public health strategy that will:
   a) increase funding of public health programs, services and strategies across all provinces and territories;
   b) strengthen existing and creating new federal initiatives that are aimed at protecting and promoting health from a population-based perspective; and
   c) invest in research and development of public health strategies that will reduce the demand on a costly, increasingly burdened national health care system.

4. Current health care delivery approaches need to be supported by public health strategies such as surveillance and population assessment of health issues and gaps, needs-based assessment and greater linkages between community and academic partners.

Romanow’s Recommendations:

No. 22: Prevention of illness and injury, and promotion of good health should be strengthened with the initial objective of making Canada a world leader in reducing tobacco use and obesity.

No. 23: All governments should adopt and implement the strategy developed by the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers Responsible for Sport, Recreation and Fitness to improve physical activity in Canada.

No. 24: A national immunization strategy should be developed to ensure that all children are immunized against serious illnesses and Canada is well prepared to address potential problems from new and emerging infectious diseases.

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**alPHa’s Response to the Final Report:**

**Greater Emphasis Needed**

alPHa applauds Mr. Romanow for including prevention services as a part of “primary health care” and for declaring that the best way to sustain our health care system over the longer term is by placing more emphasis on preventing disease and on promoting healthy lifestyles (pg. xx).

However, he did not go far enough in actually emphasizing disease prevention and health promotion (“Public Health”) within the broader health system in his recommendations concerning a strengthened role for prevention (pg. 128). There needs to be a greater shift toward wellness and less focus on treatment. He has advised that the federal government fund $2.5 billion over two years into a Primary Health Care Transfer, a portion of which would expand provincial and territorial efforts on prevention, health promotion and integration of these activities with primary health care.

But alPHa would like to see an immediate dedication and implementation of funding specifically for these areas. Current policies, programs and services need to be shored up at all levels of government and, where none exist, created.

**Public Health In Its Own Right**

Mr. Romanow does not view prevention and promotion as the sole mandate of Public Health but instead sees that these activities are another role for front-line physicians and other primary care providers. This would suggest that there is overlap between the work of public health practitioners and primary care providers. alPHa agrees with this view. Realistically, we see this happening when, for example, a patient goes to his family doctor and is told to stop smoking or to lose weight and to engage in a healthier lifestyle.

Yet, Mr. Romanow fails to take into account that Public Health is also a system itself within the health care sector. Many of the issues in health care are hospital- or doctor-focused. Along with its provincial and territorial partners, the federal government needs to ensure that other entities besides primary care, such as public health, are given their share of attention and resources. Public health, it must be remembered, is an integral gatekeeper of the health of Canadians.

Public health, as an entity in its own right, also demands that a national public health strategy – one that incorporates disease prevention, health promotion and health monitoring – be formed and clearly articulated with the goal of better health outcomes for all Canadians. Such a strategy would include, but not be limited to, greater funding for public health programs and services to provinces and territories.

Overall, Mr. Romanow’s recommendations are a federal step in the right direction to strengthening public health approaches, but more work will need to be done in this area.