

***FOR DISCUSSION***  
**Competencies and Standards:**  
**In a Public Health context, what is the difference?**  
*April 20, 2007*

**What is the issue?**

During consultations about Public Health core competencies, questions were raised about the differences and relationship between the terms, ‘competencies’ and ‘standards’. It is important that the meaning of these words is clear because one of the goals of articulating core competencies is to improve communication about public health practice.

**Competency vs. standard?**

‘Competency’ refers to behaviour; ‘standard’ refers to a level of service, intervention or outcome. In other words, competency describes an activity that a public health professional engages in to meet a standard or standards. Both ‘standards’ and ‘competencies’ could refer to structure, process or outcomes.

**Definition of ‘core competency’**

Competency refers to human capability for performing certain functions. Core competency refers to capability required within an industry that is essential for a person to be accepted to work in that industry; in this case public health. See appendix 1 for a list of generic definitions of competency and core competency.

**Core Competencies for public health**

Core competencies are the essential skills, knowledge and abilities necessary for the broad practice of public health. They transcend the boundaries of specific disciplines. Core competencies are independent of program and topic, so that they reflect an overall public health approach to issues.

**Why are core competencies for public health important?**

To ensure that public health efforts are effective means ensuring that skilled health professionals are available. A human resource planning approach based upon core competencies will focus less on which public health professional performs a function and more on the skills and knowledge required to practice in public health. Competencies contribute to public health workforce development. They:

- provide a foundation to assess the types and numbers of public health practitioners
- identify the knowledge, skills and abilities required across an organization or program to fulfill public health functions;
- provide a basis for curriculum development, assessment of training and professional development needs
- provide consistency in job descriptions and performance assessment
- enhance capacity to identify the appropriate mix of public health workers;

- encourage service delivery in an inter professional, population based, and client centred manner;
- contribute to the recruitment, development, and retention of public health practitioners.

A set of core competencies for public health in Canada has been drafted. The competencies have been grouped under 7 domains:

➤ Core public health sciences	➤ Socio-cultural
➤ Assessment & analysis	➤ Communication
➤ Policy development & program planning	➤ Leadership
➤ Partnership, collaboration & advocacy	

### Definition of ‘program standards’

Program standards refer to a level of service, intervention or outcome i.e., what a public health unit or an individual can be expected to deliver in terms of quantity, quality, timeline, location and unit of work. ‘Program standards’ implies the inclusion of clear goals, expectations and measures. Each of the domains associated with the core competencies for public health (above) also could have standards assigned to them. See Appendix 2 for a generic list of definitions of ‘program standards’.

### Some examples

Although the terms, ‘standards’ and ‘competencies’ are closely related, the table below provides examples to compare the differences.

Examples of STANDARDS (delivery levels)	Examples of COMPETENCIES (behaviours)
Structure Standard	Organizational competency
# staff and skill mix of staff meet industry standards	<u>Management Competency</u> - Effectively assigns staff according to their skills, knowledge and interests
Process Standard	Public Health Department or Practitioner competency
Surveillance of communicable disease	<u>Public Health Department competency (An interdisciplinary team that could include a Public Health Physician, epidemiologist and Public Health Nurse)</u> - Detects evidence of an outbreak, conducts epidemiological analysis of surveillance data and takes appropriate action to mitigate the outbreak
# restaurant inspections	<u>Environmental Health Officer competency</u> - Uses evidence based protocols to inspect a restaurant
% population immunized against influenza	<u>Licensed Practical Nurse competency</u> - Correctly administers injection <u>Registered Nurse competency</u>

<p>Community Health Nursing Standard:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Promoting health</li> <li>▪ Building individual capacity</li> <li>▪ Building relationship</li> <li>▪ Facilitating access and equity</li> <li>▪ Demonstrating professional responsibility and accountability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Correctly assesses signs of anaphylactic shock</li> </ul> <p><u>Public Health Nurse competency:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Applies knowledge of community assessment and community development to facilitate community to increase control over its health</li> <li>- Counsels individuals to modify behaviours that are not conducive to good health</li> <li>- Uses mediation skills to facilitate inter-agency cooperation</li> <li>- Coordinates stakeholders to develop a plan for comprehensive related services</li> <li>- Searches the literature and seeks expert advice when developing a new program plan</li> </ul>
<p>Outcome standard</p>	<p>Outcome competency</p>
<p># reported food safety infractions</p>	<p><u>Public Health Inspector competency</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communicates evaluation of food safety report e.g. written report and/ or media interview</li> </ul>
<p>incidence of reported food poisoning</p>	<p><u>Public Health Epidemiologist competency</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Designs a population based study to describe incidence of influenza</li> </ul>
<p>morbidity and mortality rates associated with Influenza in a community in a given year</p>	<p><u>Public Health Physician competency</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Using surveillance and epidemiological skills reports to the community about out break trends</li> </ul>

**Conclusion**

Clear articulation of public health program standards, core competencies and profession based competencies will contribute to effective planning of public Health programming. This clarification, combined with education to assure that competencies are achieved will improve interdisciplinary delivery of public health services. In turn, the public and health care policy makers will better understand the role of the Public Health sector in improving the health and well- being of Canadians

## Appendix 1 Definitions of Competencies and Core Competencies

### Definitions of Competencies

A search of Google and Wikipedia using key words competency + definition yielded the following definitions:

- Skills that are essential to perform certain functions, for example, social workers must have competencies in a number of areas to be effective professionals and to be licensed.  
[www.addiction-rehabilitation.com/glossary.html](http://www.addiction-rehabilitation.com/glossary.html) retrieved December 29,2006
- The combination of observable and measurable knowledge, skills, abilities and personal attributes that contribute to enhanced employee performance and ultimately result in organizational success.  
[unebapps01.nebraska.edu/nuvalues/nuvalues.nsf/0/f4992592227a086e86256aa9006ea691](http://unebapps01.nebraska.edu/nuvalues/nuvalues.nsf/0/f4992592227a086e86256aa9006ea691) retrieved December 29,2006
- These practical applications of the objectives will be used to evaluate a student's performance.  
[www.comsep.org/Curriculum/CurriculumCompetencies/DefinitionOfTerms.htm](http://www.comsep.org/Curriculum/CurriculumCompetencies/DefinitionOfTerms.htm) retrieved December 29,2006
- the skills and resources which a company has  
[mcgraw-hill.co.uk/he/web\\_sites/business/marketing/jobber/files/glossary/c.html](http://mcgraw-hill.co.uk/he/web_sites/business/marketing/jobber/files/glossary/c.html) retrieved December 29,2006
- Areas of personal capability that enable people to perform successfully in their jobs by achieving outcomes or completing tasks effectively. A competency can be knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, or personal characteristics. The competencies required for successful performance may or may not be expressed formally by an employer (adapted from a definition by Angus Reynolds in The Trainer's Dictionary: HRD Terms, Abbreviations, and Acronyms, HRD Press, 1993).  
[www.astd.org/astd/Resources/performance\\_improvement\\_community/Glossary.htm](http://www.astd.org/astd/Resources/performance_improvement_community/Glossary.htm) retrieved December 29,2006
- Competencies represent clusters of skills, abilities and knowledge needed to perform jobs. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Competencies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Competencies) retrieved December 29,2006

### Definitions of core competency:

A search of Google and Wikipedia using key words Core + competency + definition yielded the following definitions:

- A set of skills that an organization must perform well for the organization to be successful. Core competencies define the essence of "who the organization is."  
[emissary.acq.osd.mil/inst/share.nsf/Glossary](http://emissary.acq.osd.mil/inst/share.nsf/Glossary) retrieved February 26, 2007

- Fundamental knowledge, ability, or expertise in a specific subject area or skill sets that provide a company with a marketplace advantage  
[www.infosys.com/services/glossary.asp](http://www.infosys.com/services/glossary.asp) retrieved February 26, 2007
- One of a company's primary functions which is considered essential to its success.  
[www.blinco.com/solutions/glossary/logisticsae.htm](http://www.blinco.com/solutions/glossary/logisticsae.htm) retrieved February 26, 2007
- A company's core competency is the one thing that it can do better than its competitors. A core competency can be anything from product development to employee dedication.  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Core\\_competency](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Core_competency) retrieved February 26, 2007
- Identified units of competency within a competency standard that an industry has agreed are essential to be achieved if a person is to be accepted as competent at a particular level. All units may be core, but in many cases competency at a level will involve core units plus optional or specialisation units of competency. Core competencies are normally those central to work in a particular industry.  
[www.southbank.tafe.net/site/tools/glossary/A-E.asp](http://www.southbank.tafe.net/site/tools/glossary/A-E.asp) retrieved December 29,2006
- a complex of those value-added issues of knowledge which the unit manages the best in the world  
[www.finnevo.fi/eng/contents/show\\_page.php](http://www.finnevo.fi/eng/contents/show_page.php) retrieved December 29,2006
- Relates to a company's particular areas of skill and competence that best contribute to its ability to compete.  
[www.yellowpencil.co.nz/brand%20sharpening/brand%20glossary](http://www.yellowpencil.co.nz/brand%20sharpening/brand%20glossary) retrieved December 29, 2006
- These are the Key Skills that an effective teacher must possess. The three core competencies are: 1. The ability to identify faults. 2. The ability to analyse faults and, 3. The ability to remedy those faults. Each is a key skill. The three do not combine to form a single skill.  
[www.instructor-training.co.uk/ITP\\_Glossary.htm](http://www.instructor-training.co.uk/ITP_Glossary.htm) retrieved December 29,2006
- The principal distinctive capabilities possessed by a company – what it is really good at.  
[mcgraw-hill.co.uk/he/web\\_sites/business/marketing/jobber/files/glossary/c.html](http://mcgraw-hill.co.uk/he/web_sites/business/marketing/jobber/files/glossary/c.html) retrieved December 29,2006

## Appendix 2

### Definitions of performance standards

A search of Google and Wikipedia using key words performance + standards + definition yielded the following definitions:

- Verifiable, measurable levels of service in terms of quantity, quality, timeliness, location, and work units. Performance standards are used in a performance-based PWS to (1) assess (i.e., inspect and accept) the work during a period of performance; (2) provide a common output-related basis for preparing private sector offers and public tenders; and (3) compare the offers and tenders to the PWS. The requiring activity's acceptable levels of service are normally stated in the PWS. ...  
[emissary.acq.osd.mil/inst/share.nsf/Glossary](http://emissary.acq.osd.mil/inst/share.nsf/Glossary) retrieved December 29, 2006
- Regulatory requirements limiting the concentrations of designated organic compounds, particulate matter, and hydrogen chloride in emissions from incinerators. 2. Operating standards established by EPA for various permitted pollution control systems, asbestos inspections, and various program operations and maintenance requirements.  
[www.waterquality.de/hydrobio.hw/PTERMS.HTM](http://www.waterquality.de/hydrobio.hw/PTERMS.HTM) retrieved December 29, 2006
- The standards an individual health care provider is expected to meet to achieve the desired quality of care. Volume of care also may be covered, e.g. office hours, office visits per week or month, on-call days, surgical procedures per year, etc.  
[www.insurance.wa.gov/consumers/glossary.asp](http://www.insurance.wa.gov/consumers/glossary.asp) retrieved December 29, 2006
- The ability to perform competencies in keeping with occupational and industrial specifications.  
[www.ntatt.org/glossary.html](http://www.ntatt.org/glossary.html) retrieved December 29, 2006
- Federal, state, or local codified specifications that condition development activities to limit the extent to which a structure or activity may affect the immediate environment.  
[www.buzzardsbay.org/glossary.htm](http://www.buzzardsbay.org/glossary.htm) retrieved December 29, 2006
- Standards against which to measure performance. Potential standards of comparison include: Previous performance, e.g., the percentage of lane miles of roads in satisfactory condition this year compared to last year's percentage; performance of similar organizations, e.g., percentage of graduates from a public high school who attend college compared to the rate for other public high schools; performance of the best organizations, e.g., percentage of public high school graduates who attend college ...  
[strategicsourcing.navy.mil/reference\\_documents/defs.cfm](http://strategicsourcing.navy.mil/reference_documents/defs.cfm) retrieved December 29, 2006
- Measurements of acceptable student performance established by accreditation boards for schools and/or by schools.  
[alt.uno.edu/glossary.html](http://alt.uno.edu/glossary.html) retrieved December 29, 2006
- Definitions of what a child must do to demonstrate proficiency at specific levels in content standards.

- [www.wrightslaw.com/links/glossary.assessment.htm](http://www.wrightslaw.com/links/glossary.assessment.htm) retrieved December 29, 2006
- The levels of achievement pupils must reach to receive particular grades in a criterion-referenced grading system (e.g., higher than 90 receives an A, between 80 and 89 receives a B, etc.).  
[www.upei.ca/~xliu/measurement/glossary.htm](http://www.upei.ca/~xliu/measurement/glossary.htm) retrieved December 29, 2006
  - statements that refer to how well students are meeting a content standard; specify the quality and effect of student performance at various levels of competency (benchmarks) in the subject matter; specify how students must demonstrate their knowledge and skills and can show student progress toward meeting a standard  
[www.finchpark.com/courses/glossary.htm](http://www.finchpark.com/courses/glossary.htm) retrieved December 29, 2006
  - The criteria by which a stated goal is measured. NR 151 includes specific performance standards affecting urban, agricultural and transportation activities.  
[www.wnrmag.com/supps/2003/jun03/termr.htm](http://www.wnrmag.com/supps/2003/jun03/termr.htm)
  - The minimum technical criteria that must be met by cable television systems, consistent with standard set by the FCC or the local ordinance.  
[www.bcapa.com/about/glossary.php](http://www.bcapa.com/about/glossary.php) retrieved December 29, 2006
  - Performance standards identify levels of student achievement based on a demonstrated degree of mastery of the academic content standards tested. California uses five performance standards for its California Standards Tests:  
[www.shastalink.k12.ca.us/cascade/STAR%20Glossary.htm](http://www.shastalink.k12.ca.us/cascade/STAR%20Glossary.htm) retrieved December 29, 2006
  - describe the performance of a competency. There are 2 parts to performance standards: a) Performance Criteria tells the student how to perform the competency. This is a detailed list of how the competency must be performed in order for the learner to be considered competent in a specific skill. b) Performance Conditions state the situation in which the assessment of the competency will take place. This can include materials available during the assessment.  
[online.nwtc.edu/vrc/curric/Glossary.htm](http://online.nwtc.edu/vrc/curric/Glossary.htm) retrieved December 29, 2006
  - statements that define the extent to which students are meeting the stated standards; in the instance of English language proficiency standards, performance definitions correspond to descriptions of what students can do at each language proficiency level  
[www.wida.us/Resources/ELP\\_Standards\\_Overview/section\\_09.html](http://www.wida.us/Resources/ELP_Standards_Overview/section_09.html) retrieved December 29, 2006
  - A description of student performance against a specific content standard. The standard describes measurable behaviors of student performance in levels such as advanced, proficient or partially proficient.  
[www.k12.wy.us/eqa/aa/programs/wycas/archive/PubsPresent/pubs/TestDesign/glossary.htm](http://www.k12.wy.us/eqa/aa/programs/wycas/archive/PubsPresent/pubs/TestDesign/glossary.htm) retrieved December 29, 2006
  - One of three kinds of standards (the others are content standards and delivery standards) for learning; refers to standards for achievement in subject-matter knowledge.  
[highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072486694/student\\_view0/glossary.html](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072486694/student_view0/glossary.html) retrieved December 29, 2006