Wicked Problems and Ontario Health units: 
a focus on research, legislation and practice

Ontario’s 36 public health units are consistently challenged by complex, multi-dimensional and complicated problems that stress finite health unit resources. In order to address these so-called ‘wicked’ problems that have a significant public health impact in the communities they serve, provincial health units should consider problem solving methodologies which include an assessment of variables such as the regulatory environment, research, knowledge transition and the application of public health professionals in practice. While an assessment of these variables may not provide an immediate or steadfast solution that ultimately solves the wicked problem, the process can assist in identifying the genesis of a potential solution for future application.

The study applied the use of grounded theory to conduct an assessment of provincial health unit administration and facilitation of health protection activities associated with food production of ready-to-eat foods. It examined the wicked problem in lieu of provincial and federal production, on-going foodborne illness, and varying levels and application of legislation which leads to challenges for all levels of the bureaucratic process. The analysis provides future researchers and health units with a means of addressing wicked problems to assert and provide a practical means of solution using a multi-disciplinary approach.