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Public health inspectors meet on P.E.I.

Risks associated with food-borne illnesses will be high on agenda for institute.

A group representing public health inspectors across Canada is pushing to ensure a health education course is mandatory for all food handlers.

The Canadian Institute of Public Health Inspectors is meeting in Charlottetown over the next three days and the risks associated with food-borne illnesses will be high on the agenda.

Rob Bradbury, past-president of the institute, says few provinces have mandatory health education for food handlers. He said that is a key building block for ensuring the public is properly protected.

"The food service industry has a lot of food handlers, it's a very transient industry, there's lots of people in there as first-time workers," Bradbury said in an interview Sunday.

"It's a super industry but we need to increase the training. We need to have something in the legislative framework that says everybody that is working in this industry has to have food handler training and education."

The Canadian Institute of Public Health Inspectors is holding its 70th annual general meeting at the Delta Prince Edward today through Wednesday.

Keynote speakers include Dr. Doug Powell from the Guelph Food Technology Centre, Senator Jane Cordy of Nova Scotia and Dr. Lamont Sweet, chief health officer for Prince Edward Island.

There is no shortage of issues facing public health in Canada from mold and indoor air quality to water quality to BSE, avian flu, West Nile virus and bio-terrorism.

Bradbury said the whole host of concerns is putting a strain on public health officials in Canada. He said there is not enough money or resources being spent on public health.

"If you look back on the SARS outbreak, I think it was pretty evident that there wasn't enough capacity to deal with the issue when it hit in Ontario," said Bradbury, who now operates a private consulting firm in Victoria, B.C.

"If it happened in P.E.I., can we as public health practitioners and professionals do what needs to be done? I think the answer was clearly no."

A new public health agency, announced for Winnipeg, will help co-ordinate public health initiatives across Canada, said Bradbury. The new agency is expected to take a lead role in public health education and crisis management much like the Centres for Disease Control in the United States.

Bradbury said the new centre will ensure that Canada can react to public health crises.