

# **CANADIAN SOCIETY FOR EPIDEMIOLOGY AND BIostatISTICS (CSEB)**

**June 3, 2015**

## **The CSEB Lifetime Achievement Award to Dr. Munir Ahmed Sheikh Delivered by Dr. Colin L. Soskolne**

Thank you CSEB President, Thy Dinh. Thank you, Vicky Kirstman, as well as the CSEB Awards Committee, for looking favourably on the nomination to not only recognize, but also to honour Dr. Munir Ahmed Sheikh with the 2015 CSEB Lifetime Achievement Award.

Dr. Sheikh, former Chief Statistician at Statistics Canada, was nominated in recognition of his career contributions to ensuring the integrity of the Canadian census. The Canadian census, under Dr. Sheikh's predecessor, Ivan Fellegi and followed by Dr. Sheikh, was the envy of the world for many decades. Not any longer!

We all take for granted so many things in life: for example, that the sun will rise and set, and that we will probably awaken tomorrow, well enough to face the day. And, at the professional level, as epidemiologists and biostatisticians, we take for granted — in our work to generate the evidence needed to inform rational policy — that the data at the foundation of our methods for generating evidence will be both accessible and reliable. Not any longer!

In most countries, it is the census that permits epidemiologists and biostatisticians to do their work, from developing sampling frames to standardizing rates. Well, we can no longer take the Canadian census for granted. It has been compromised to the point of uselessness.

Thank you Dr. Sheikh for your efforts to prevent this from happening. Sadly, through all of this upheaval, you and all Canadians have fallen victim to the ideologically-driven agenda of the current federal government. Politics indeed matter!

But, today, we honour Dr. Sheikh as a hero in the Canadian context. He has spent his career focusing his training and expertise on ensuring the highest quality data through his tenure with Statistics Canada ... a job that he quit in 2010 because of the interference of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and then Industry Minister Tony Clement in canceling the long-form census. Despite his retirement, Dr. Sheikh continues to expose the consequences of the loss of the mandatory long-form census for evidence-based decisions at all levels of governance throughout Canada.

In review, Dr. Sheikh's most recent string of professional contributions of distinction came to Canadian attention when, five years ago (in 2010) he demonstrated exceptional professional integrity by resigning his position as Head of Statistics Canada. That resignation occurred

soon after the Government of Canada, in refusing to reinstate the long-form census, misstated his and Statistics Canada's position, and acted on the contention that with the addition of \$22M to increase the sample-size, a voluntary household survey could be as reliable as the mandatory long-form census.

Dr. Sheikh would not permit his good name to be used to mislead Canadians that the replacement voluntary household survey could achieve the goals of the census, even with a larger sample size. In his resignation statement, Dr. Sheikh answered the rhetorical question: "can a voluntary survey be a substitute for a mandatory census" by clearly stating "It cannot". Time has now proven that Dr. Sheikh was correct, and the \$652 million spent on the exercise was largely wasted because the survey data obtained are, according to an overwhelming majority of the scientific community, not only useless, but dangerous too!

Dr. Sheikh remains committed to the restoration of the long-form census and, to that end, he lectures extensively, gives interviews, writes for the media and journals, and contributes to books.

At the time of the controversy in 2010, the CSEB, under my signature as then President, had sent a letter, as did some 700 other entities, including the Statistical Society of Canada, which appealed to the government of Canada to reinstate the long-form census. Only some seven entities encouraged the government to continue with its plan to cancel the long-form census. Despite the overwhelming vast number of appeals to reinstate the long-form census, the government proceeded with its cancellation plan on the basis that it was an affront to Canadian sensibilities that Canadians should be mandated to fill in a form and provide private information.

In fact, as it turns out, perhaps two Canadians had formally complained about the long-form census on privacy grounds over the decades of its existence. Indeed, over those same decades, epidemiologists and biostatisticians had been able to rely on the census. Sadly, this is no longer the case because the loss of the long-form census has undermined the very toolkit that epidemiologists and biostatisticians depend on.

The implications of the above-noted subversion of the work of epidemiologists and biostatisticians in Canada would not have come to light had it not been for Dr. Sheikh's knowledge, courage and foresight in defending the integrity of the census, ending a career dedicated to protecting that on which we depend so heavily in our collective work in the public interest. Dr. Sheikh, please come forward to accept this award with gratitude ... for your efforts in the interests of those Canadians who place their trust in evidence as opposed to ideology.