



FACT SHEET: Public Health Policy and the Australian Public Health Landscape

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Purpose of Resource

The purpose of this resource is to provide information and links to support learners to better understand and navigate the Australian health system and public health policy environment to ensure effective planning, development and implementation of population health activities. This resource also provides a range of useful links to relevant population health policy and government documents.

Units of Competency

This resource supports learning and completion of assessment for the following units of competency:

- HLTPOP501C Apply a Population Health Framework
- CHCAD603B Provide Systems Advocacy

Acknowledgement

This tip sheet has been adapted from *Public Health in Australia: The Public Health Landscape*, National Public Health Partnership, 1998, Australia.

Australia's Public Health Infrastructure Today

Federal, State and Territory Governments have been the major providers of public health services for the people of Australia, and each jurisdiction is responsible for creating its own institutional arrangements for public health programs, individual priorities and divisions of labour. Constitutional responsibilities in this area rest largely with the States and Territories. Local government is an important contributor at the service level having a central role in public health surveillance and action. The resources available to governments in achieving public health objectives are considerable and include universities, non-government and community organisations, and the workforce, programs and institutions of the primary health care system. Successful public health activities are carried out through multi-disciplinary teams, often with highly specialised expertise, using the range of regulatory powers available to the State with cooperation of the national level agencies.

Australian Government has a broad policy leadership and financing role in health matters, while the States and Territories are largely responsible for the delivery of public sector health services and the regulation of health workers in the public and private sectors.

The Federal Government

The Federal Government's public health effort affects the health of the community directly through the following core functions.

- Facilitate the development of national public health policy.
- Facilitate ongoing planning, monitoring, reporting, research, training and evaluation of public health activities.
- Facilitate the development of national consistency in policy standards, legislation and regulation, workforce competencies, environmental protection, disease prevention and outbreak control methods.
- Foster and initially finance innovation in population health programs.
- Conduct national programs in public health.
- Advocate, build and strengthen a population health constituency with key players and with the public.
- Conduct, in consultation with other partners, Australia's international responsibilities and obligations in public health.

The State and Territory Governments

Most core functions of public health have traditionally been the responsibility of the States and Territories. Under the various Health Acts (which usually cover environmental health, communicable diseases, food safety and tobacco controls), States and Territories pursue the following public health objectives.

- Identify public health issues state wide through epidemiological surveillance.
- Allow for timely intervention and monitoring of health outcomes.

- Develop policy related to communicable diseases, environmental health, immunisation, food, radiation safety, workplace risk, water quality, drugs and poisons, and emergency management.
- Organise preventive and early detection programs such as cancer screening, school health, etc.
- Support population health literacy and health promoting behaviour.
- Develop strategies for new and emerging health problems.
- Give government the power to act quickly in public health emergencies.
- Examine the effectiveness, and collaborate with all other government and non-government public health sectors and relevant authorities, to address public health issues and provide for an appropriately skilled public health workforce.

The individual jurisdictions organise their activities in a more similar than dissimilar way, to collaborate with all other public health sectors to develop and implement specific public health policy, programs and regulatory framework. Some states have adopted tobacco hypothecation as a way of funding tobacco control and other health promotion activities.

Local Government

Within States and Territories, there are a large number of local government bodies that can perform public health service functions in a variety of ways with different emphasis from State to State, as determined in the respective Health Acts and Local Government Acts. Local councils vary with respect to the type (rural or metropolitan), the role they play, and the extent to which they respond to local needs.

The local government interacts with public health activities involving environmental management, economic development, public safety, maintaining roads, cultural and recreational development, land use planning and provision of community services. Strategic planning of service delivery at the local level may be perceived as a more business oriented approach. Goods and services once provided by local government councils may be supplied by contractors. Councils are now both providers as well as purchasers of services.

Universities and Research Institutions

Australia has a strong public health academic sector both in research and in education.

The role of preventive care is becoming increasingly significant and the current trend is to provide health promotion training to medical students through medical school curricula in Australia.

There is a strong orientation towards evidence based health practice and some health outcome programs that have been established in part through the support of the NHMRC and Federal, State and Territory Governments. The Australasian

Cochrane Centre facilitates the preparation, maintenance and dissemination of systematic reviews of controlled trials regarding health care interventions that help influence service provision and clinical practice. The Centre is linked to the international Cochrane Collaboration. In addition, AIHW has established the Australian Health Outcomes Clearing House which assists in the dissemination of information to the public health sector.

There are other specific research institutions which play an important role in public health research efforts in Australia including national centres which focus on HIV/AIDS, immunisation and drugs and alcohol. Although the basis of their funding is governmental, they also receive significant funding from benefactors and grants. Health promotion foundations (e.g. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation) are an important source of health promotion research and training funds.

There are some 40 World Health Organisation (WHO) Collaborating Centres in Australia that contribute to public health activities. These research institutions are recognised by the international health community for their excellence in laboratory medical research, health promotion and education. Their respective focus is wide reaching and includes issues such as virus research, biosafety, vaccine production, food controls, epidemiology on chronic disease, drug quality control, medical education, and health promotion.

NGOs, Professional and Community Organisations

Non-government organisations have a significant role in building capacity for promoting health in communities, and in other sectors, and have often developed strong intersectoral working relationships. This sector comprises a range of services which are funded from a variety of government and non-government sources, and the public health activities that are carried out by the different organisations are increasing as more government services are contracted out.

Individual organisations generally focus on specific issues (e.g. heart disease, asthma, diabetes, and cancer), or on specific population groups (e.g. Aboriginals, people with HIV/AIDS, and the aged). They therefore have specific knowledge, experience and access to individuals and communities. The larger organisations (e.g. the National Heart Foundation, the various State Anti-Cancer Councils, and the Asthma Foundation) all have designated funding specifically for public health research and health promotion, have well-established credentials and play clear roles in health care and promotion.

A range of professional organisations (e.g. the Australian Public Health Association (PHA), the Australian Institute of Environmental Health (AIEH) and the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians) play significant roles in promoting the health of the Australian population. Their roles include workforce advancement through journals and specialised education, policy development and intersectoral networking. The workforce represented by the wide variety of professional associations includes academics, administrators, community nurses, social workers, school teachers, youth workers, and others.

Medicare Locals

In 2011, the Government established new organisations, Medicare Locals, to plan and fund extra health services in communities across Australia. To ensure decisions about health services could be made by local communities in line with local needs, Medicare Locals were created as local organisations - 61 of them Australia-wide. Medicare Locals work with GPs and other primary health care providers to ensure all Australians, regardless of where they live, can access effective primary health care services.

The Australian Government invests more than **\$1.8 billion** so Medicare Locals can coordinate and deliver important **health services including after-hours GP services**, immunisation, mental health support, targeted and tailored services for those in need, and eHealth. Medicare Locals employ more than **3,000 frontline health workers** to deliver services in communities across the nation. Medicare Locals have flexibility to be innovative in how they respond to the needs of their communities.

For example Medicare Locals have set up after-hours walk-in clinics, fund existing general practices to expand and improve their after-hours services to patients, extend pharmacy hours to fill scripts provided to patients outside normal operating hours, support mobile GP care to patients in their homes and residential aged care facilities, and provide after-hours outreach care to homeless and vulnerable populations.

Primary Health Care Providers

The backbone of the community based primary health care system is General Practice. General Practice is seen by the community as the most authoritative source for information and advice on reducing health risks and for many provide the main source of public health education. Important functions include encouraging greater use of one-to-one clinical consultation opportunities (patient management rather than solely treatment based methodologies), planned screening of patients, group education activities, broader community development strategies with or without a multi-disciplinary approach, and involvement in population based policy and planning activities.

Additional Information and Links

<http://www.nphp.gov.au/publications/broch/contents.htm>

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/phd-what>

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-publicat.htm>

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/Publishing.nsf/Content/phd-prevention-np>

<http://australia.gov.au/topics/health-and-safety/health-promotion>

<http://www.medicarelocals.gov.au>