

Public Health Research Policy Statement

New knowledge for improved health



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Acknowledgements

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Foreword

The Public Health Branch is part of the Rural and Regional Health and Aged Care Services Division of the Department of Human Services.

The vision of the Public Health Branch is to promote better health and wellbeing for all Victorians, to respond to major threats to public health including epidemics and disasters and, wherever possible, prevent ill-health and disability.

Seven priorities for action are outlined in the *Public Health Group Strategic Directions 2005–09* document which will guide the Branch's work over the next four years:

- protecting the health of all Victorians
- addressing health inequalities and social factors that sustain health and wellbeing
- progressing environmental sustainability
- reducing the toll of chronic diseases, conditions and injuries
- promoting a good start in early life
- creating effective partnerships for health
- building positive organisational wellbeing.

To meet these challenges our work must be based on sound science, good management and effective partnerships.

We are committed to a broad view of health complemented by effective action, based on informed decision-making through a solid foundation of research, policy and legislation.

The Public Health Branch plays a significant role in supporting and promoting public health research in Victoria. As well as commissioning and using research, it has a leadership role in monitoring ethical standards for health research, securing and allocating research funds and ensuring human and physical research capacity exists in the State.

The Public Health Branch's research program is a priority-driven program of strategic research and evaluation research that contributes directly to population health and evidence-based health care within an equity framework. This policy document describes the strategies and processes, which will guide the Branch in supporting research for the next four years. Research program objectives include the establishment of:

- mechanisms to achieve stakeholder engagement and collaboration
- a framework for setting research priorities
- processes and systems to ensure research quality and effectiveness.

I look forward to the challenges, opportunities and potential gains public health research stands to deliver in the coming years.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Hall". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr Robert Hall
Director Public Health and Chief Health Officer

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Background | 2 |
| Public Health Research Program 2005–09 | 3 |
| Goal of public health research | 3 |
| Guiding principles | 3 |
| Public Health Branch—role, functions and focus | 5 |
| Priority setting framework | 6 |
| Funding framework for public health research | 7 |
| Public Health Branch research program | 9 |
| Infrastructure to underpin the research program | 10 |
| Appendix—Definitions | 12 |

The main goals of [public] health research are the advancement of scientific knowledge and utilization of knowledge to improve health and health equity.¹

1 World Health Organization Health Research Systems Analysis concepts and indicators, www.who.int/rpc/health_research/concepts/en/

- research is defined as investigative work undertaken on a systematic and rigorous basis using quantitative and/or qualitative methods to generate new knowledge that seeks to impact on human physical, social or psychological wellbeing.
- equity in health is defined as the absence of potentially remediable, systematic differences on one or more aspects of health across socially, economically, demographically, or geographically defined population groups or subgroups.

Introduction

This policy document will guide future public health research decisions and actions in line with the Public Health Branch's strategic directions. The existing research program has evolved from the policy document *Investing in Health: strategic directions for medical and public health research and development in Victoria*². Since then, changes in government policy and funding processes have had a significant impact on public health research commissioned by the Public Health Branch. In responding to these policy and funding changes, a review of the Public Health Branch's public health research activities was undertaken during 2004–05 and its recommendations provide the basis for this policy. For the purpose of clarity definitions of 'research' and 'public health research' are included in the Appendix.

2 Department of Human Services, *Investing in Health: Strategic directions for medical and public health research and development in Victoria*, Public Health and Development Division, Melbourne, December 1998.

Background

In 1998–99, public health research support was established through an annual budget allocation of \$2 million through the Public Health Division, Department of Human Services in response to the policy document *Investing in Health*.

The funding was used to commission research projects in four key areas—communicable and non-communicable disease prevention, injury prevention, rural health development and health services research, and to fund strategic programs aimed at ensuring sustainability of public health research capacity within the State.

By 2004–05, the research program budget was \$2.7 million and was used for a broad range of public health research initiatives with the objectives of contributing to knowledge development and innovation and expansion of research expertise and capability in Victoria.

The Public Health Branch has funded a mix of project and capability development initiatives.

Capability development—investment in the human capital and capability, for example the funding provided for the Masters/Doctoral Scholarships in Public Health for Indigenous Victorians, support for the Victorian component of larger national research programs, and for approved public health research related events.

Projects—investment in targeted public health research projects, relevant to the work of the Public Health Branch. In 2003–04 and 2004–05, public health research projects were funded in five priority areas—communicable disease, environmental health, health inequality, injury prevention and non-communicable disease.

The Public Health research program oversees the development and implementation of strategies and policy matters associated with public health and medical research. It is the principal liaison point with the Victorian Public Health Research and Education Council (VPHREC). The research program also works closely with the Office of Science and Technology in the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development concerning biomedical research issues.

Public Health Research Program 2005–09

Goal of public health research

The goal of public health research is the advancement of scientific knowledge and the utilisation of knowledge to improve health and health equity.

Within this context, the Public Health Branch aims to promote high quality public health research in association with the research community in order to improve the health and wellbeing of Victorians.

The Public Health Branch recognises that public health research is fundamental to evidence-based decision making, leading to the development of excellence in policy, practice and public health management.

Guiding principles

The public health research program:

- values and is committed to supporting public health research and development
- supports public health research which is strategic and targeted at achieving the goals, objectives and priorities of the Department of Human Services in improving and maintaining the health of all Victorians
- supports public health research that promotes the development of knowledge and innovation which is subsequently translated into effective health policy, programs and practice
- supports research that informs policy development, implementation and evaluation in priority areas for which evidence is needed
- funds public health research that is innovative and of high quality
- contributes to building a capacity for underpinning effective strategic research and enabling national and international competitiveness

- encourages public health research that is built on collaborative partnerships between research institutions, industry, government, non-government organisations and health services
- encourages research endeavours that attract public health research funds to Victoria from external sources
- funds public health research that is accountable to the Government and community through a transparent, performance-driven framework.

The Public Health Branch research program seeks to commission research that is relevant and applicable to the needs of the Branch and the Department of Human Services, and to translate research findings and results into effective policy, programs and practice.

Public Health Branch—role, functions and focus

The Public Health Branch plays a significant role in supporting and promoting public health research in Victoria. Its role is to:

Demonstrate leadership and professionalism

- define the Department of Human Services' public health research program and in partnership with key stakeholders define and articulate a vision for a state public health research system
- identify appropriate public health research priorities
- set and monitor ethical standards for public health research and research partnerships
- monitor and evaluate the department's public health research program.

Fund and purchase

- secure research funds and allocate them accountably.

Create and sustain resources

- build, strengthen and sustain Victoria's capacity to conduct public health research.

Commission and use research

- commission scientifically valid public health research
- translate and communicate research findings to inform health policy, practice and public opinion
- promote the use of public health research that will assist delivery of services and programs to improve health.

Commissioned public health research will:

- be relevant to the strategic objectives, priorities and needs of the Public Health Branch and the Department of Human Services in improving the health of Victorians
- provide a targeted response to research questions and issues arising from programs and services
- be applied in terms of improving and/or modifying policy and practice
- provide scientifically based evidence to inform good policy and practice.

The Public Health Branch research program will work with key stakeholders to ensure that departmental research initiatives are complementary, and do not duplicate effort. Furthermore, the research commissioned should address knowledge gaps, be innovative and of high quality, unlikely to be funded by other funding bodies, and contribute to building Victoria's strategic research capability.

Priority setting framework

The Public Health Branch *Strategic Directions 2005–09* sets out the branch priorities for action for the next four years. Within this context and informed by the work of branch program areas, the research program will establish a framework for reviewing and determining public health research priorities that will assist informed, rational and consistent resource allocation decisions.

The public health research program will achieve this objective, in part, through the establishment of the Public Health Research Advisory Panel. In the first instance, the criteria for determining public health research priorities may include consideration of:

- strategic priorities (national research priorities, national and state health priorities, Department of Human Services research priorities and state government policies that impact on health)
- the size and impact of the problem to be addressed in terms of the actual or potential burden of disease

- equity dimensions to the health status of Victorians
- anticipated return on investment through the application of research to policy, programs and services
- collaboration and partnerships (across the public and private sector, research institutes, academic institutions, non-government organisations and industry)
- areas of research excellence
- available budget for research expenditure.

Funding framework for public health research

The following is an indicative funding framework for allocating public health research funding, recognising that the level of funding may fluctuate from year to year:

Category 1

- Research capacity and capability
- scholarships/fellowships
 - staff placement/training
 - research related event funding

Category 2

- Public health research grants
- short term, small-scale projects (under \$80,000)
 - long term, large scale projects (3–4 projects, each under \$250,000–300,000, 2–3 years duration)

Category 3

- Urgent funding
- commission research to investigate an urgent public health issue

Category 4

- Partnership funding
- provide a partnership role to a research organisation which assists in leveraging national and international funds to Victoria
 - partnering with key external stakeholders to achieve synergies.

Category 1: Research capacity and capability

- a) Scholarships/fellowships—supports research in public health, in order to maintain a career development path for skilled and experienced senior research staff.
- b) Staff placement—allows a short term (6–12 months) exchange of research staff between research organisations, and the Public Health Branch to further develop skills and expertise.

This category of funding builds the research skills and expertise of the public health workforce and has a long-term focus on sustainability of Victorian public health capabilities.

Category 2: Public health research grants

- a) Short term, small-scale projects (under \$80,000)—allocates a small pool of funds each year towards ‘seed’ funding and investigation to be undertaken on straightforward projects with closely defined scope.
- b) Long term, large scale projects (under \$250,000/300,000)—a small pool of funds each year towards larger projects in terms of scope, size, complexity, timeframe.

Commissioned research projects will be of high quality and targeted to the strategic objectives and priorities of the Public Health Branch and the Department of Human Services.

Category 3: Urgent funding

A small amount of funding will be allocated to support research that by its nature is an urgent public health issue.

Category 4: Partnership funding

A small amount of funding will be allocated to enable the Public Health Branch to partner and/or lend support to research organisation proposals for large-scale national and international research funding submissions. The partnership arrangement is intended to be a tangible measure of support to the research organisation bidding for national and international funds.

This category would allow the Public Health Branch and other organisations, such as VicHealth, to collaborate in joint funding of specific research initiatives for example shared contributions to research centres or scholarships/fellowships, or shared small project grants in specific areas.

Public Health Branch research program

The Public Health research program, will ensure a cohesive and coordinated approach to commissioning public health research across the Public Health Branch.

The Public Health research program has primary responsibility for commissioning and funding public health research, with branch operational programs commissioning smaller amounts of research.

The research program will establish two committees to provide expert advice to the Public Health Branch in relation to public health research in Victoria. The committees will be established with clearly defined roles, responsibilities and reporting arrangements.

1. Public Health Research Working Group

A working group will be established to oversee the public health research program/ agenda of the Public Health Branch.

The working group will advise the Director, Public Health on program priorities for public health research, participate in selection processes and make recommendations about resource allocation in relation to public health research projects and related initiatives. The working group will comprise broad representation from the Public Health Branch with input from other relevant branches within the Rural and Regional Health and Aged Care Services Division as required.

2. Public Health Research Advisory Panel

The advisory panel will provide high-level advice to the Director, Public Health and the Executive Director Rural and Regional Health and Aged Care Services Division. The panel will comprise experts with broad experience from the public health research community, the Public Health Branch and other relevant areas of the Department of Human Services.

The panel will provide a forum for discussion concerning the setting of research priorities, new developments and emerging concerns, and strategies for improving the translation of research findings to improve the health of Victorians. Expected outcomes will be improved collaboration and cooperation between researchers, fund providers, policy makers and practitioners, with improved return on research investment and policy relevance.

Once a year, the research program, on behalf of the working group and advisory panel will report to the Director, Public Health and the Executive Director Rural and Regional Health and Aged Care Services regarding any significant changes in strategic direction and seek endorsement of proposed public health research priorities, confirmation of level of funding, and approval for the general implementation plan for the next 12 months.

Infrastructure to underpin the research program

1. Public health research database

The public health research program will develop a database that records the public health research initiatives commissioned and funded by the Public Health Branch. The database of public health research will include the following information:

- details of funded organisation
- type of research (aims, objectives, method)
- outcomes (results, findings, implementation)
- funding (amount, source, contributions from other sources—Commonwealth, international organisations, industry)
- duration of project
- type of collaboration
- post research implementation of findings (within an agreed timeframe)
- performance measures
- accountability
- plain language abstract (for inclusion on the department’s website).

Over time, the development of a comprehensive and up-to-date database will enable the Public Health Branch to monitor the type of research funded, assess application/ implementation of results and findings, help to avoid duplication of previously funded research, and assist with identifying gaps in research knowledge.

2. Your Health—A report on the health of Victorians

The Public Health Branch intends to publish a report every two years incorporating high quality information from a variety of sources that can be analysed to deliver short and long term profiles on the health of the Victorian population.

This report will assist in identifying public health problems, patterns and trends and selecting specific themes/areas for further analysis and review by the public health research advisory panel and subsequent action by the working group. The report will also be a resource for stakeholders, within and external to government.

Additional information about the Public Health Branch research program is available at: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/researchprograms>

Appendix—Definitions

A definition of research, and public health research is presented to provide a common understanding and interpretation of the terminology and parameters for policy development and funding.

Research

Wills Review—The Virtuous Cycle: Working together for health and medical research

The Wills Review describes research as a complex and multi-faceted activity that addresses a variety of objectives in the health sector. At one end of the spectrum is research to advance knowledge; at the other end are applied studies such as clinical trials of new drugs or evaluations of public health interventions. Inbetween these is a range of enquiry targeted towards specific priorities in health, health care and health services. All research endeavours contribute to the health of communities and complement one another.

The Wills Review used the World Health Organization typology of research, as outlined in the table on the following page.

The World Health Organization defines research in three broad categories, ‘fundamental’, ‘strategic’ and ‘(intervention) development and evaluation’, each with a different balance between advancement of knowledge and application. Each of these categories encompasses, in varying degrees, the full spectrum of health and medical research: biomedical, clinical, public health, health economics, health policy and health services.

The Wills Review adopted the terminology ‘priority-driven research’ to refer collectively to the last two categories (strategic, and development and evaluation research) that require a priority-driven approach, while all other research was referred to as ‘fundamental research’.

The Review then explicitly addressed the broad continuum of health research and its diverse objectives, and emphasised that a range of strategies was required in Australia to meet future challenges.³

3 Commonwealth of Australia, *The Virtuous Cycle: Working together for health and medical research*, December 1998, p 16.

| Type | Definition | Indicative purpose | |
|--|---|--------------------|-----------------|
| Fundamental research | generates knowledge about problems of scientific significance | Advance knowledge | Change practice |
| Strategic research | generates knowledge about specific health needs and problems. These may be conditions, risk factors or sources of inefficiency or inequity in health systems | Advance knowledge | Change practice |
| Development and evaluation research | creates and assesses products (vaccines, drugs, diagnostics, prostheses or equipment), interventions (public or personal health services), and instruments of policy that improve on existing options | Advance knowledge | Change practice |

Source: Commonwealth of Australia, *The Virtuous Cycle: Working together for health and medical research*, December 1998 quoting World Health Organization (1996), Investing in Health Research and Development, p. 3.

Public health research

The final report of the Economic Development Committee's Inquiry into Medical and Public Health Research⁴ provided the following definitions of medical and public health research:

Bio-medical or basic research examines the biological determinants of health and disease and establishes the biological base for preventing, treating and curing diseases.

Clinical or applied research looks at the effectiveness of strategies to diagnose and treat diseases.

Public health research is a population-based approach, combining practical skills, statistical analysis and medical knowledge, all directed to the maintenance and improvement of health within the population as a whole, rather than for an individual.

The research approach used in public health generally encompasses three broad streams:

- epidemiological research into the determinants and distribution of health, disease and risk factors
- health promotion research into strategies for enhancing health and preventing illness and injuries
- health services research into more effective and efficient approaches and systems for delivering health care.

Public health research should focus on knowledge translation; turning the knowledge gained through health research endeavour into improved health for the population, more effective policies and services, and a strengthened health system.

⁴ Economic Development Committee, *Inquiry into Medical and Public Health Research in Victoria—Final Report* presented to the Parliament of Victoria, Melbourne, 1997.

