Public Health Practice in Australia Today

A statement of core functions
Foreword

Public health practice in Australia can be described from different angles - by the problems it addresses, the disciplines it encompasses and by its key principles and objectives to list a few. Each perspective is valid and appropriate to some use or circumstance. What has been missing however is a description of public health as a set of commonly recognised functions.

This statement, developed by the National Public Health Partnership (NPHP) and endorsed by the Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council in June 2000, attempts to fill this gap. It evolved from the findings of a national Delphi Study, which surveyed the opinions of public health practitioners and leaders in 1999 and found a high level of agreement on what are the important functions of public health.

The core functions statement is part of a set of tools developed by the NPHP to assist with public health planning and practice improvement. It is intended primarily as a reference point for initiatives that aim to build or strengthen public health capacity and infrastructure. It complements the Planning Framework for Public Health Practice¹, which focuses on planning for specific public health issues.

As an initial attempt, this statement is not likely to be the last word on defining public health core functions in Australia. Furthermore, the statement does not describe the full range of activities undertaken by public health practitioners nor is it meant to prescribe or limit those activities. The NPHP welcomes debate and feedback to inform the further development of the statement.

Many questions can follow from this statement. How do you ensure that all communities are covered by the core functions? What capacity including workforce is required to deliver them? Does this capacity currently exist? What should be the priorities for capacity building? How do we monitor and measure performance of core functions? Some of these are already the subject of NPHP initiatives. Others still need to be addressed.

On behalf of the National Public Health Partnership Group I offer this document as an aid to all efforts aiming to build public health capacity in Australia.

Dr Andrew Wilson
Chair

¹ Available from the NPHP Secretariat. See contact details on back cover.
The purpose of public health

The art and science of public health practice in Australia today seeks to improve health and wellbeing through approaches which focus on whole populations. Priorities are to reduce disparities in health status between social groups and to influence the underlying social, economic, physical and biological determinants. Public health practice informs and empowers individuals and communities, and creates healthy environments through the use of evidence-based strategies, best practice and quality improvement approaches, and effective governance and accountability mechanisms.

Core Functions

Assess, analyse and communicate population health needs and community expectations

Prevent and control communicable and non-communicable diseases and injuries through risk factor reduction, education, screening, immunisation and other interventions

Promote and support healthy lifestyles and behaviours through action with individuals, families, communities and wider society

Promote, develop and support healthy public policy, including legislation, regulation and fiscal measures

Plan, fund, manage and evaluate health gain and capacity building programmes designed to achieve measurable improvements in health status, and to strengthen skills, competencies, systems and infrastructure

Strengthen communities and build social capital through consultation, participation and empowerment

Promote, develop, support and initiate actions which ensure safe and healthy environments

Promote, develop and support healthy growth and development throughout all life stages

Promote, develop and support actions to improve the health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other vulnerable groups

2 The term "core functions" refers to the public health effort which is broader than those activities which government public health authorities are responsible for carrying out or funding.
Public health practices

Public health practice in Australia today covers many diverse activities as shown by a recent Delphi Study that asked Australian public health experts what they considered to be public health functions. The diverse practices identified by the Delphi Study have been listed below under each of the nine core functions. They have been further categorised as being established if they are commonly regarded as being part of what public health does, and emerging if they are relatively new but becoming accepted as part of public health.

Assess, analyse and communicate population health needs and community expectations

**Established Practice**
- monitor physical, mental and social morbidity and the causes of mortality
- research and monitor the determinants of health
- assess population health needs and risks
- undertake research to identify the causes of and solutions to health problems in populations

**Emerging Practice**
- conduct public health program evaluation and outcome research
- evaluate health services and conduct research on the outcomes of health services
- conduct cross-disciplinary and multi-method research

Prevent and control communicable and non-communicable diseases and injuries through risk factor reduction, education, screening, immunisation and other interventions

**Established Practice**
- conduct disease, injury and risk factor surveillance
- conduct disease outbreak investigation and control
- screen for selected communicable and non-communicable diseases
- implement comprehensive communicable disease control programs including the provision of immunisation
- treat cases of infectious disease
- provide public health laboratory services
- provide veterinary public health services
- enable and encourage communities and individuals to adopt and maintain healthy practices such as appropriate diet, moderate alcohol intake, physical activity, no smoking and improved oral health (including fluoride supplementation)

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3 The report is available from the National Public Health Partnership Secretariat. See contact details on back cover.
provide individual and community education to promote behaviours which reduce the risk of injury

advocate, legislate for, develop and promote safer products and environments

**Emerging Practice**

- monitor, research and respond to newly emerging disease threats (eg nosocomial infections including antibiotic resistance)
- address the social and economic determinants of non-communicable diseases
- address risk factors for intentional injuries

**Promote and support healthy lifestyles and behaviours through action with individuals, families, communities and wider society**

**Established Practice**

- undertake personal and mass media education and advocacy for tobacco, nutrition, drugs, alcohol, physical activity and healthy sexuality
- provide health information and education, which is sensitive to language and culture, to develop individual health knowledge, attitudes and behaviours
- use social marketing to complement education and community development strategies to promote health

**Emerging Practice**

- shift focus from action at the level of the individual to broader societal and structural issues eg food supply

**Promote, develop and support healthy public policy, including legislation, regulation and fiscal measures**

**Established Practice**

- contribute to the development of and promote the implementation of healthy public policy
- evaluate the impact of health and other public policy on population health, with particular emphasis on identifying inequalities
- provide evidence based advice for policy and program initiatives for health protection and promotion
- advocate for and work in partnership with all sectors to develop legislation & regulations that protect and promote health
- review, formulate, enact and enforce health legislation and regulations
- ensure sustainable financing for health protection and promotion

**Emerging Practice**

- conduct health impact assessments of other sectors’ policies and actions
- develop fiscal strategies that support health improvement
- develop financial incentives to encourage preventive health care
- promote public policy measures to reduce inequalities in health
- promote access to health services according to need

**Plan, fund, manage and evaluate health gain and capacity-building programmes designed to achieve measurable improvements in health status, and to strengthen skills, competencies, systems and infrastructure**

**Established Practice**
- undertake strategic and operational planning
- directly manage and contract for service provision
- develop resource allocation and priority setting systems
- improve the quality and scope of public health information
- ensure adequate public health knowledge and skills in the health workforce
- ensure that the public health workforce participates in continuing professional development
- build organisational structures and processes for public health within agencies
- build links between the health sector and other sectors
- build organisational links between health agencies

**Emerging Practice**
- develop and implement quality assurance processes for public health
- develop strategic alliances and partnership agreements
- develop performance management systems

**Strengthen communities and build social capital through consultation, participation and empowerment**

**Established Practice**
- promote community and consumer participation in decisions affecting their health
- develop community capacity to identify and act on public health problems
- fund community programmes
- consult on planning and priorities of services

**Emerging Practice**
- work with communities and other sectors to enhance social networks and contribute to building social support in communities

**Promote, develop, support and initiate actions which ensure safe and healthy environments**

**Established Practice**
- protect and ensure water quality
- vector control
- promote food access and quality and ensure safety
- control hazardous environmental substances and wastes
- control radiation
- ensure drainage, sewerage and solid waste disposal
- control atmospheric pollution
- control drugs and poisons and the quality of therapeutic goods and appliances

**Emerging Practice**
- promote safe and healthy working conditions
- promote environments which promote physical, mental and social health
- promote ecologically sustainable development

**Promote, develop and support healthy growth and development throughout all life stages**

**Established Practice**
- provide public health services for mothers and children
- provide services for early childhood development and care
- provide school health services including dental health
- provide school health education including drug and sex education
- provide prenatal and neonatal screening
- provide women’s health and family planning services

**Emerging Practice**
- provide mental health promotion programs
- provide public health services for older people
- provide genetic screening and counselling services

**Promote, develop and support actions to improve the health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other vulnerable groups**

**Established Practice**
- provide public health services and advocate for health care for indigenous peoples
- provide emergency and natural disaster services to protect health
- provide public health services and advocate for health care for refugees, the homeless and disabled

**Emerging Practice**
- provide public health services and advocate for health care for victims of violence and other crises
- provide public health services and advocate for the health care of multiculturally diverse communities
- advocate for occupational health services
- advocate for mental health care services