

Public health and wellbeing for Victoria

Victoria's health—prevention is the future



The Victorian government has a long tradition of investment in preventive health. It has progressively developed policy, programs and resources aimed at encouraging preventive health practices across all levels of government, non government agencies and the private sector. The government has shown further commitment to preventive health through an act of parliament, the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act (2008)*.

Nationally a strong focus on prevention has recently developed. In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has committed to a six-year program of investment in prevention through the National Partnership Agreement on Preventive Health. This investment includes incentives for successful preventive health programs. The focus of these programs is on healthy workers, healthy children and healthy communities.

A National Preventive Health Agency has been established under the National Partnership Agreement. The Agency will inform best practice in policy design for preventive health as well as administer a national social marketing program.

A multi faceted approach to public health and wellbeing

Research has demonstrated that many diseases and causes of death are preventable. The Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Act (2008) ensures that prevention remains a high priority of the Government. The Act also requires that public health and wellbeing become the responsibility of all government departments and levels of government in Victoria. This is necessary if strong preventive action is to be taken as many of the factors that affect health and wellbeing are influenced by the environment in which we live.

Environmental factors that influence health

Environmental factors that have an impact on public health and wellbeing have been identified by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2003, *Social determinants of health: The solid facts*. Eds. Wilkinson, R & Marmot, M. Second edition). These factors include:

- levels of stress in people lives
- the start in life that babies and infants are given
- how well people are connected to their families and communities

Environmental dimensions



Built/physical



Economic



Social



Natural

Source: PDF Management

- the nature and security of employment
- addiction to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs
- access to nutritious food
- the availability of suitable transport.

Research has shown that people who are more disadvantaged by these environmental factors have higher rates of disease and die at a younger age. If disease and ill health are to be prevented then these environmental factors need to be modified. This requires action from many service areas that are not usually viewed as health services. They include housing, education, employment, transport, community development and social support.

Under the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Act (2008) the Minister for Health is required to produce a State Public Health and Wellbeing Plan every four years. The first Plan, due in September 2011, is likely to identify objectives that reflect the whole-of-government response needed to make a significant impact on the environmental factors that cause ill health.

Infectious disease, toxic agents and chronic illness

Infectious conditions and toxic agents are also significant causes of disease. Reducing the spread and incidence of these diseases is a key function for the protection of health and wellbeing.

Similarly, if people are given the right support and treatment chronic illnesses can be slowed down, stopped and in some cases reversed. This support and treatment is another element in a comprehensive approach to protecting health and wellbeing.

These elements along with those that address the environmental causes of ill health make up a multi-pronged approach to the protection of health and wellbeing.

Public health and wellbeing through prevention

Strong prevention efforts related to the environmental determinants of health involve coordinated policies and programs across government departments, levels of government, non-government organisations and the private sector.

The Public Health Branch of the Department of Health will work to ensure that each of these sectors is aware of the research into the impact of environmental factors and how policymaking and planning can positively influence public health and wellbeing. The State Public Health and Wellbeing Plan is the platform on which government policymaking and planning will be based.

Partnerships to improve prevention

Effective coordination of services and programs relies on sound planning practices. Long-term planning for improved health and wellbeing of Victorians will best be served by the establishment of strong and lasting partnerships between all levels of government, non-government agencies and the private sector.

Partnerships are based on a commitment to work together to achieve common goals. International experience, research and evaluation of programs from many different settings have demonstrated that genuine collaboration is an effective way of building and sustaining new policies and programs.

The Public Health Branch will actively support initiatives throughout government, non-government organisations and the business sector to promote sustainable partnerships for improving the health and wellbeing of Victorians. This support will build upon partnerships that already exist such as *Primary Care Partnerships*. The COAG National Partnership Agreement on Preventive Health will ensure that extra resources are available to assist in the development of partnerships.

Planning based on evidence of what works

If policies and practices are to effectively promote health they need to reflect research findings on the likely success of various prevention approaches. Findings from research will be made available in a form that enables policymakers to use them in prevention planning across government and the non-government and business sectors. The findings will be disseminated by the Public Health Branch.

The Branch will also coordinate a program of research development aimed at filling gaps in knowledge about effective preventive strategies and approaches.

Building a prevention workforce

If the prevention effort is to be a success, it will need a workforce that is skilled and of sufficient size. The Public Health Branch is developing a public health workforce strategy to guide the building of a prevention workforce. A central feature of this strategy will be to work in partnership with education and training providers to boost the capacity of the workforce to undertake prevention work. Prevention skills are required in policymaking as well as planning and managing and implementing programs across the Victorian community.

Policymaking and planning for prevention

Training and education activities and tools based on evidence will be made available to assist policy makers and planners to consider how they can effectively plan for health and wellbeing.

Planning resources

A major resource for assisting with planning for the effect of the environment on health is the *Environments for Health* planning guide. Since 2001 this guide has been used to guide municipal public health planning. It has also been used at state-government level to guide planning processes. It provides guidance by promoting an understanding of the environment across the natural, built, social and economic domains.

In 2009 *Environments for Health* has been reprinted and supplemented with a range of guides that will assist planners to more easily access an extensive range of planning resources.

A support and capacity building strategy aimed at planners and policymakers is being created to support *Environments for Health*. The purpose of the strategy is to promote skill development to assist planners and policymakers build effective partnerships and develop policies and plans that protect and promote the health and wellbeing of Victorians. Staff in the Department of Health Regional Offices will also be supported through this strategy so that they can play a stronger role in assisting local-level planning for public health and wellbeing.

Population health data

A significant focus of the support strategy will be the use of population health data to underpin the planning and evaluation of municipal public health plans. The quality and range of population health data now allows local governments to use it with confidence in planning and evaluating public health and wellbeing initiatives. From early 2010, *Victorian Population Health Survey* data will be available at the local government area level.

The support strategy for using population health data for planning and evaluation will include an understanding of how data can be used to identify and tackle health inequalities that exist between different population groups.

Municipal public health planning and local government

Since the early 1990s local governments in Victoria have been required to prepare Municipal Public Health Plans. The Public Health and Wellbeing Act (2008) strengthens this municipal public health planning role. *Environments for Health* is designed to assist local governments to fulfil their public health planning responsibilities under the Act.

A number of planning guides and strategies dealing with specific public health issues, such as heatwaves, fluoridation of water supplies and immunisation produced by the Public Health Branch can be used to complement local-level planning based on *Environments for Health*. The guides are based on strong evidence about what works and, as a package, they can be used by local government to undertake comprehensive, evidence-based municipal public health planning.

Municipal public health planning is likely to become more and more effective in promoting public health and wellbeing as policies and planning practices across government, non-government and business sectors evolve in line with the intentions of the Public Health and Wellbeing Act and related policies.



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