

Review of the Health Act 1958: Discussion Paper

Further Responses from the

Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences, Deakin University

The wording of the Discussion Paper reflects the shift in thinking towards an ecological approach to Public Health since the late 1980s. Prof Ilona Kickbusch (1989) argued that public health needs to be

“...ecological in perspective, multisectoral in scope and collaborative in strategy. It aims to improve the health of communities through an organised effort... Public health infrastructures need to reflect that it is an interdisciplinary pursuit with a commitment to equity, public participation, sustainable development and freedom from war. As such it is part of a global commitment and strategy” (p. 7).¹

It is felt that the Health Act needs to be reviewed for its language and rhetoric, and revised to reflect the shift towards an ecological approach. Its principles need to embrace the ecological paradigm, and guide ecological thinking and action.

The Health Act should be regarded, and used, as a framework that guides action: not only within the public health arena, but also across all government departments and policy areas. It needs to be written in a way that results in a whole of government approach to addressing the social and environmental determinants of health. We need to ensure that all other Departments will account for the implications for health and wellbeing in their policies, and that developers (both public and private) conduct Health Impact Assessments as part of their core business (see specific comments below). In this way, the Health Act needs to make more specific references to the interface between public health and urban planning, and the particular details of the Planning and Environment Act 1987.

The Ottawa Charter states that health promotion action means:

- Building healthy public policy
- Creating supportive environments
- Strengthening community actions
- Developing personal skills
- Reorienting health services.

The Ottawa Charter on Health Promotion is mentioned obliquely on page 5, however the core components of the Charter are not listed. The Jakarta Declaration on Leading Health Promotion into the 21st Century² recommends additional strategies that include:

1. Promote social responsibility for health

¹ Kickbusch, I. (1989). Good planets are hard to find: Approaches to an ecological base for public health. In V. Brown (Ed.). 2020: A sustainable healthy future – toward an ecology of health (pp. 7-30). Proceedings of a national workshop. Melbourne, Australia: Commission for the Future.

² http://www.who.int/hpr/NPH/docs/jakarta_declaration_en.pdf

2. Increase investments for health development
3. Consolidate and expand partnerships for health
4. Increase community capacity and empower the individual
5. Secure an infrastructure for health promotion

The Ottawa Charter and Jakarta Declaration represent two of the most significant statements from the public health arena in the last 20 years, and should form the basis of the Health Act.

Environments for Health, the Victorian Municipal Public Health Planning Framework, already espouses this ecological approach, and is based on the ecological thinking and practice established by the Ottawa Charter and Jakarta Declaration. Environments for Health explains the links between community capacity, infrastructure and social capital, and shows local governments how to build health and wellbeing into their communities. The Health Act could incorporate many of the principles and directions identified in Environments for Health.

Perhaps we should rename the Health Act, given that we are hoping for the Health Act to 'Lead thinking and action on health and wellbeing in Victoria into the 21st Century'. Some ideas for consideration could include "The Victorian Quality of Life and Wellbeing Act", or "The Population Health and Wellbeing Act".

With regards to Municipal Public Health Planning:

- The Health Act needs to state clearly the role of local government as a specific level of governance
- Local government's role is not just to deal with environmental health dangers, diseases and 'health problems', but to work with its constituents to develop a vision for the community, and promote the health and wellbeing, social capital and quality of life of the people who live, visit and work in their municipalities.
- The Act should place greater emphasis on the process by which local councils develop MPHPs.

Professor John Catford
Dean
Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences
Deakin University
221 Burwood Highway
BURWOOD 3125