

Review of the Health Act 1958

A New Legislative Framework for Public Health in Victoria: A Discussion Paper



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Women's Health Victoria is an independent state-wide women's health promotion, advocacy and health information service. Our work is largely in partnership with other organisations through which we reach the maximum number of Victorian women, in particular women with limited or poor access to services. It is one of two state-wide and nine regional women's health services which make up the Victorian Women's Health Program.

Our clearinghouse informs our advocacy on women's health issues and provides the basis for our representation, submission writing, and a range of health information products and services. WHV provides a health information telephone line, library and web site to ensure women have access to information that will assist them to make informed decisions about their health care.

Women's Health Victoria (WHV) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this Committee's request for submissions.

Issues for Comment:

4. Intersectoral relationships

Question 3. Should the new Act recognise the importance of promoting public health and, if so, how should the new Act do this?

The current Health Act has a strong focus on issues such as sanitation, immunisation and other narrowly defined public health issues. In developing a more modern Act, a broader understanding of public health needs to be incorporated. This understanding should reflect issues such as health inequities, social conditions and accesses to services.

Question 11. Should the concept of partnership between state and local government, and between government and non-government, be addressed in the new Act?

WHV believe that the concept of these types of partnerships must be addressed in the new Act as currently, the interaction between these groups is not described. The new Act needs to provide an understanding of how these partnerships work, rather than simply identifying the functions of each agency.

5. Health Information

In the event that the community need to be educated about certain issues, the Act should consider the role of the media in disseminating accurate information. More and more, we, as a community have to deal with outbreaks on a mass scale such as the recent outbreaks of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD). As a result, the community needs access to appropriate, accurate and timely information. Currently, the modus operandi of the Health Act is not conducive to the dissemination of information via the media. An incorporation of this would strengthen the Act.

6. Health Impact Assessment

Question 28. Should a separate requirement for HIA be introduced in the new Act and, if so, in what circumstances should HIA be conducted and what should be the threshold for triggering it?

In section 6.22 of the Health Act, HIA is referred to as a potentially separate requirement in public health. WHV would support such a broadening of the legislation. Within the current Act, undertaking HIA occurs only within the context of an EIA. The way people understand and interpret their environment has changed over time. For example, rather than simply focusing on structural safety, a HIA, undertaken independently of an EIA, could also consider perceptions of safety, which can impact on use of services and participation in the community. These can act as indicators of community health. Today the application of the HIA is seen to be narrow and would benefit from a broader application. WHV looks to generate a culture where people see HIA as best practice.