

Health Promotion and the Preventative Health Taskforce

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The release in October of the Preventative Health Taskforce's discussion paper, 'Australia: the healthiest country by 2020' offers health promotion practitioners their greatest opportunity to participate in national policy development for many years.

The Taskforce, which was established by the Federal Health Minister Nicola Roxon in March, has been asked to develop a National Preventative Health Strategy for the Government by mid-2009, focusing initially on obesity, smoking and alcohol.

The Taskforce has proposed the following targets to be achieved by 2020:

- halt and reverse the rise in overweight and obesity;
- reduce the prevalence of daily smoking to 9% or less;
- reduce the prevalence of harmful drinking for all Australians by 30%; and
- contribute to the 'Close the Gap' target for Indigenous people, reducing the 17-year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

As the report notes, "...smoking, obesity, harmful use of alcohol, physical inactivity, poor diet and the associated risk factors of high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol cause approximately 32% of Australia's illness".

Overweight and obesity in Australia have been steadily increasing over the past 30 years. While smoking is declining, almost 2.9 million Australian adults still smoke on a daily basis. One in five Australians drink at a level that puts them at risk of short-term harm at least once a month, and among young adults aged 20-29 the prevalence of drinking at levels for long-term risk of harm is significantly higher than among other age groups.

Further, obesity, tobacco and alcohol all make significant contributions to the Indigenous life expectancy gap as well as contributing to other areas of disadvantage in Australia.

We know from evidence around the world as well as in Australia that prevention works. Indeed, Australia has been a leader in many aspects of prevention over several decades.

We know from experience in areas such as tobacco control, road safety, cardio vascular disease, measles and HIV AIDS that prevention is a good investment for the community. We know also that despite all the rhetoric we have heard over the years, prevention remains the 'Cinderella' of our health system. Only approximately 2% of national health expenditure goes to public health and preventive programs, a situation described by the Prime Minister at the 2020 Summit as 'crazy'.

So where next?

The Taskforce's Discussion Paper outlines a number of approaches both overarching and specific to the three initial target themes. They range from the organisational (such as a proposal for a national health promotion agency) through legislative and regulatory controls to public and other forms of education. The Taskforce must address broad approaches to the social determinants of health and specific proposals that can be implemented at local as well as national levels. The Taskforce is also concerned to ensure that all relevant sectors of the community are engaged, including individuals, organisations, decision-makers, health and other professionals, and groups that undoubtedly have a significant role to play such as the food and drinks industries.

The Taskforce Discussion Paper and three Technical Reports are available at www.preventativehealth.org.au. The deadline for written responses to the Discussion Paper is 2 January, and the Taskforce has also commenced a series of consultations in all States and Territories.

The first round of documents provide a starting point. The National Preventative Health Strategy Report will be about specific recommendations. What should we do about prevention? How should it be done? Who should do it? Who else should be involved? When should it be done?

All this is surely core business for anyone interested in health promotion in Australia. We urge all readers of the Journal to participate in the work of the Taskforce, whether by making a submission or participating in our consultations. We want to hear your views about what should be in the National Preventative Health Strategy and, crucially, what you think we should be recommending to the Government and the community.

The Minister, Nicola Roxon, has consistently expressed her strong support for prevention. Prevention also ranks high in the priorities for the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission. The target of 'the healthiest country by 2020' may be ambitious, but we believe that with the support and skills of key groups such as the health promotion community it can be achieved. We urge you to let us know how this can best be done, and how you can contribute.