EDITORIAL: IMPROVING THE HEALTH OF CHILDREN IN NSW

Garth Alperstein
Community Paediatrician, Community Health Services, Central Sydney Area Health Service

Victor Nossar
Service Director, Department of Community Paediatrics, South Western Sydney Area Health Service

At the close of the 20th century, health services for children in NSW have accomplished significant achievements. However, many challenges lie ahead.

Overall, most children have never had a greater opportunity to be healthier: they have access to abundant, high-quality food and clean water, schooling and housing, the highest levels of medical care, and safe and effective vaccines against many of the common infectious diseases.

However, at the same time we are witnessing a marginalisation of the health needs of children as the demands of an expanding aged population compete for resources. We are also witness to the progressive impoverishment of an increasing proportion of children in Australia. Already more than 40 per cent of children are living in families receiving a pension or the Additional Family Payment.1

To date, the report, Health Goals and Targets for Australian Children and Youth remains the clearest statement of the health needs of children and young people.2 It succinctly states the high-priority health outcomes that must be achieved by any health service or program. This report also recognises that disadvantaged children are more likely to become ill, to be injured, and to require greater levels of health care.

In the next four issues, the NSW Public Health Bulletin will explore the essential components of any program that seeks to improve the health of children. Beginning in May 1998, Dr Elisabeth Murphy and Ms Caroline Wraith from the Health Services Policy Branch, NSW Health Department, outline the critical issues of child health in NSW. This article includes examples of how services currently being provided in NSW address the health goals and targets for Australian children.

In the June issue readers will be able to examine the health status of children in NSW and the information that permits monitoring of their progress. In the July issue, there will be a closer examination of the process of identifying effective strategies that are available to address the identified health needs and to achieve the desired outcomes. The August issue will present a detailed exploration of the priority programs in NSW capable of achieving improved health for children and youth.

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Children and young people are shaped by and shape the environments in which they live. An ecological perspective requires child health professionals to develop a range of strategic responses at individual, family, neighbourhood, regional and national levels. The models for this approach to improving the health of children and youth have been outlined in the strategic plan ‘Health Gain for Children and Youth of Central Sydney’ (developed by the Central Sydney Area Health Service over the past two years). Some of these programs have been implemented in some health areas such as South Western Sydney Area Health Service.

If the outlined challenges to the continued improvement of child health in NSW are to be met, and if the health goals and targets for Australian children are to be achieved, health care services in NSW will need to refocus their attention to the needs of children, to identify and implement more evidence-based strategies, and to emphasise population-based illness-prevention and health-promotion programs. If the outcomes are to be attained, an effective population-based approach to child health needs to become as essential a part of health services as clinical paediatrics.

REFERENCES
3. Role of the Faculty (Chapter) of Community Child Health [discussion paper]. Sydney: Faculty (Chapter) of Community Child Health, Australian College of Paediatrics, 1997.