

## Public Health Saves Lives and Dollars: 2016 Federal Election Policy Statement

### Executive Summary

While Australians are living longer than ever before, we face major challenges to our health. The burden of preventable disease is immense and growing, with a substantial impost on our economy from lost productivity and increased medical expenses. Public health programs and infrastructure are proven to be the most successful and cost-effective way to improve the health of the population. Public health keeps Australians healthy, and every dollar spent on prevention saves over five dollars in health spending. Yet public health receives only a small fraction of the health budget. With modest increases in investment in research and teaching, advances in Australian public health will pave the way for a healthier future. Wise investment in public health research and teaching is needed to support the public health practice that supports Australia. This policy statement outlines basic, achievable steps to reach this goal.

**‘...every dollar spent on prevention saves over five dollars in health spending.’**

### Researching public health

To maximise research benefits, Australia should focus on research that benefits all Australians, or is targeted to help disadvantaged groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Research that guides policy decisions about the unique Australian health system, and about developing health systems in our region, should be prioritised. Finally, Australia should focus on research that can be translated into health gains quickly and efficiently through prevention, as a front-line service. To enhance the benefits of public research, the Australian Government should:

1. Ensure that public health is listed as a priority of the Medical Research Future Fund
2. Rename the Medical Research Future Fund to include public health research, for instance, the ‘Health and Medical Research Future Fund’
3. Increase public health spending from 1.4% of health expenditure to 5%.

### Teaching public health

Public health challenges need public health professionals, with the shortage of public health expertise in Australia worsening as a generation of public health professionals retires. The Australian Government should:

4. Fund research to better understand the workforce shortage and manage workforce planning in the broader public health remit
5. Fund expansion of existing tertiary public health undergraduate and graduate programs, including research training.

## The importance of public health

Public health is concerned with the health of populations of people. This focus allows economies of scale and can be leveraged to provide earlier, less expensive intervention, thus reducing the total cost of health care. Public health interventions have improved the health of Australians: tobacco plain packaging and advertising restrictions, reduction of the road toll, childhood and flu vaccinations and a minimum drinking age. These build on previous public health achievements that have included the most important advances in health over the last 200 years, such as clean water, nutritious food, and widespread sanitation. Substantial threats to public health remain, including flu pandemics, Zika virus, other emerging infectious diseases, and natural disasters.<sup>1-2</sup> Strong public health infrastructure and expertise in all forms of health are required to ensure Australia is ready when disaster strikes.

Already, millions of Australians suffer from at least one chronic disease,<sup>3</sup> many of which could have been prevented without medical intervention. Increased investment in public health could reduce the cost to Australia from these diseases. Public health measures that keep people healthy let them stay in the workforce, reduce sick-days and avoid costly doctor visits and hospital stays. Every dollar spent on a collection of public health prevention programs saves over five dollars in health costs.<sup>4</sup>

Some groups have substantially poorer health in Australia, including Indigenous people. Effective public health interventions will require further research and tailored training that includes an Indigenous-specific component, and educates the next generation of Indigenous health leaders.

Australia is currently enjoying a time of unparalleled innovation, in medicine and technology. While this brings many benefits, a small minority of technological developments have been detrimental, and public health surveillance is key to identifying risks. Thanks to public health, we no longer put lead in paint for toys, and doctors have stopped prescribing dangerous drugs such as thalidomide, which resulted in major birth defects. The faster Australia innovates, the more it needs public health.

The health of Australians is under threat from large-scale environmental change. For instance, climate change has been linked to increased deaths from heat stress, suicide, reduced nutrition and unpredictable migration, which complicates health infrastructure planning.<sup>5-12</sup>

Public health research can help Australia adapt to current and future challenges, by using diverse and emerging data sources and methods. Already, Australian researchers are capitalising on 'big data' to address problems in new ways, and the next decade will be one of rapid progress. Public health practice reaches across departmental and disciplinary barriers and breaks down silos, and is the best antidote to the wide-ranging threats to health that Australia faces.

**‘...public health research is a sound investment.’**

## Researching public health

Australia punches above its weight in health and medical research, but its contribution to global health research remains small. In a time of budgetary constraint, it is important that Australian research investment is well-targeted and delivers value for money. In this context, public health research is a sound investment.

Public health research provides the evidence to support Australian health policy. Biomedical research is useful, but Australia's contribution to the global effort is small, and gains made in other countries are easily applied here. On the other hand, virtually all relevant research into policy and practice in the Australian health system occurs in Australian public health institutions. Focusing research efforts on the Australian health system, and those of developing economies in the region, can inform key policy decisions for all levels of government.

The ideas generated from public health research can often be implemented quickly and efficiently. This is in contrast to biomedical research, for which it has been estimated that it takes 17 years to translate research into clinical practice,<sup>13</sup> and some discoveries are never translated into widespread medical practice.<sup>14</sup>

**‘Despite all of the benefits of public health, public health spending is only 1.4% of the total health expenditure.’**

Despite all of the benefits of public health, public health spending is only 1.4% of the total health expenditure.<sup>15</sup> Public health research is not on a level playing field when it comes to attracting funding. For instance, the title of the new Medical Research Future Fund does not include public health research. Public health and biomedical research proposals should be evaluated together on a level playing field based on their merit, including value for money, ability to inform Australian policy and practice, and how easily results can be translated into health benefits.

### Priorities

1. Ensure that public health is listed as a priority of the Medical Research Future Fund.
2. Rename the Medical Research Future Fund to include public health research, for instance, the ‘Health and Medical Research Future Fund’.
3. Increase public health spending from 1.4% of health expenditure to 5%.

## Teaching public health

There is a strong demand for public health graduates in Australia.<sup>16</sup> Australians are well aware of the shortage of doctors and nurses. A Masters of Public Health graduate earns substantially more than a Masters of Nursing graduate,<sup>16</sup> suggesting that the shortage of public health specialists is greater than for nurses. The situation could get worse if Australia follows international trends. In the US alone, the shortage of public health specialists could increase from 150,000 in 2000 to a quarter of a million in 2020.<sup>17</sup>

Australia is gambling with its future health. CAPHIA is unaware of any research that forecasts the number of public health specialists in future or compares this with future need. We should not just hope for the best and assume that Australia that it will have enough public health expertise to

ensure we can meet tomorrow's health challenges. The Australian Government should provide the modest funding needed to enable research into this vital topic, and allow evidence-based workforce planning. All levels of government in Australia would benefit from this, as government employs almost two in three recent graduates of the Masters of Public Health.<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, the Australian Government should act to help meet the current high demand for public health specialists. Australia is already home to world-leading public health universities and teaching programs. The simplest way to boost public health expertise would be to increase funding for Australian universities with public health programs, including undergraduate and postgraduate courses. This should include funding for research degrees, to ensure the sustainability of public health research and teaching.

#### Priorities

4. Fund research to better understand the workforce shortage and manage workforce planning in the broader public health remit.
5. Fund expansion of existing tertiary public health undergraduate and graduate programs, including research training.

## About CAPHIA

CAPHIA is the peak organisation representing public health in universities that offer undergraduate and postgraduate programs and research and community service activity in public health throughout Australia. Its membership of 29 organisations includes every tertiary institution with a major public health teaching program in Australia. It works to maintain high quality academic standards in the education and development of public health practitioners and researchers, leads and represent public health education in the tertiary sector and is a respected voice and advocate for the development of public health professionals and researchers within Australia. Its mission is to improve the public's health by advancing public health education, research and service.

## Briefings and further information

CAPHIA would be pleased to provide detailed briefings to current MPs and Senators and all candidates standing in the 2016 federal election regarding any aspect of our policy statement.

To make general enquiries or to arrange a briefing, please contact Devin Bowles.

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