

POSITION STATEMENT

The role of public health in meeting local and global challenges

December 2025

The Council of Academic Public Health Institutions Australasia (CAPHIA) is the peak advocacy body that represents universities and aligned organisations that educate, research and develop the Australasian public health workforce. CAPHIA advances excellence in academic standards in the education and development of public health practitioners, researchers and students across Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific.

What is the role of Public Health?

- Public health addresses the numerous interconnected local and global challenges and increasingly complex health environments.
- The public health workforce is central to addressing these challenges because it has a proven record of preventing and mitigating disease, reducing risks, and promoting health and wellbeing.
- By partnering with communities and facilitating dialogue between countries, public health professionals protect lives and build resilience, creating the conditions for societies and countries to flourish.

Why does public health matter?

- Public health education, workforce, and research ensure every nation can prevent, respond to, and recover from health threats.
- Public health has never been more critical and demands sustained and urgent investment to address key local priorities such as climate change, non-communicable diseases, mental health disorders, structural inequities and overburdened health care systems.
- Australasia is also impacted by global challenges including pandemic threats, unstable health governance, food insecurity, conflict and political instability, migration and displacement, mis and disinformation and government dismantling of public health programs.

What is CAPHIA asking for?

- CAPHIA calls on Governments, universities, and communities to commit to protecting and expanding public health education, workforce, and research, with dedicated investment and integration of Indigenous and Pacific Nations knowledges.

Local and global public health challenges

There are intersecting public health challenges within and between countries that threaten lives, economies, and stability. Public health challenges within countries are shaped by local socioeconomic, political, and environmental factors and include:

- **Climate change** resulting in record levels of heat-related mortality, increasing vector-borne disease transmission (e.g. dengue), extreme precipitation, water contamination, and dangerously high particulate matter concentrations ¹.
- **Noncommunicable diseases** are very common in Pacific nations such as Fiji, often linked to lifestyle factors like poor diet, physical inactivity, smoking, and alcohol use ²
- **Mental health disorders** including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are increasing. People with mental illness experience stigma across healthcare services, employment, education, and housing ³

- **Structural inequities** persist, leaving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, Māori in New Zealand, and Pacific Island communities more exposed to preventable disease, health system pressures, and climate-related crises ^{4 5 6}
- **Overburdened healthcare systems** exist due to workforce shortages, aging populations, and underfunded public health infrastructure present critical challenges in delivering preventive and primary care ^{7 8}

Global public health challenges include:

- **Pandemic threats** are increasing due to antimicrobial resistance from climate driven outbreaks, weakened surveillance and workforce shortages ⁹.
- **Unstable global health governance**, funding and coordination between WHO, governments, NGOs, and private sector in increasingly complex ¹⁰.
- **Food insecurity** as a result of conflict and climate change are reversing progress on global chronic undernutrition ¹¹
- **Conflict and political instability** are creating complex humanitarian emergencies in which public health infrastructure is destroyed resulting in malnutrition, infectious disease outbreaks and overwhelming acute traumatic injuries ¹²
- **Migration and displacement** due to conflict and political instability is at its highest ever recorded ¹³. Displaced people face immense pressures in accessing healthcare in conflict zones, and health system barriers in host countries such as legal restrictions, language differences, and discrimination ¹³
- **Digital health and misinformation** results in unequal access to digital health tools and the spread of health misinformation via social media affecting vaccine uptake and public trust ¹⁴.
- **Governments dismantling of foundational public health programs** such as vaccine preventable disease programs are putting children and communities at risk (e.g. measles) ¹⁵.

Australasian priorities to address public health challenges

Public health challenges are reflected in Government priorities across Australia and the Pacific region. National strategies consistently highlight the need for a skilled public health workforce to ensure national strategies can be effectively implemented and sustained.

The following examples highlight Government priorities in countries across Australasia.

Australia:

Government Priority	Role of Public Health (examples of impact)
The Australian National Preventative Health Strategy 2021-2030 emphasises the central role of public health in disease prevention and in improving health ¹⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slip-slop-slap-seek-slip skin cancer prevention initiatives ¹⁷ • Indigenous-led rheumatic heart disease program ¹⁸ • Tobacco control, folate fortification of flour and fluoridation of water ^{19 20 21}.
Australia's National Climate Risk Assessment identifies catastrophic risks to community health including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples ²²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public health professionals are guiding risk assessments, ongoing programs and strategic responses through the Climate and Health Strategy Leadership. • Public health educators, including CAPHIA, led the Western Pacific Climate and Health Responder Course which enhanced response capabilities. • Public health researchers actively monitor climate-related risks and co-design culturally safe interventions with communities
The Covid-19 pandemic exposed gaps in the region's public health infrastructure and workforce readiness, demonstrating the need for more graduates skilled in prevention and population health. ²³ .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NHMRC- and MRFF-funded epidemiologists undertook COVID-19 modelling and shaped response strategies. • Public health leaders provided evidenced-based guidance to all levels of Government • Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) protected communities during COVID-19 with locally tailored public health responses ²⁴
Australian Government have committed \$251.7 million to establish an Australian Centre for Disease Control (CDC), reflecting the importance of building national capacity to address public health threats, with workforce as a key enabler ²⁵	<p>In the Australian CDC:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public health researchers generate, synthesise, and translate evidence for decision-making • Health Promoters design interventions to reduce risk factors (e.g., tobacco, alcohol, obesity). • Field epidemiologists, public health physicians and biostatisticians coordinate rapid response teams across states and territories and run real-time disease surveillance systems to track infectious and chronic disease trends.

Aotearoa New Zealand:

The Public Health Advisory Committee (PHAC) report emphasises that the NZ government must provide “the right settings to support health and wellbeing” including “a fair tax structure, good employment conditions and fair access for all to health and social services” while stressing “the importance of mana, self-determination and developing whānau and community capacity”²⁶.

Government Priority	Role of Public Health (examples of impact)
Pae Ora (Healthy Futures Act 2022) The public health workforce plays a vital role in realising the Pae Ora vision of intergenerational wellbeing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting Māori-led programmes such as Whānau Ora and Ngā Tini Whetū, which have proven effective in improving whānau wellbeing through whānau-centred, kaupapa Māori approaches^{27 28} Co-designing and delivering culturally safe interventions in partnership with Māori communities.²⁹ Continuing to develop and embed culturally responsive practices across the public health system, despite structural changes.²⁶
National Preventive Health Initiatives have contributed significantly to reducing child poverty and improving wellbeing	<p>Public health initiatives include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Income support programmes for families with children have shown health benefits (e.g. reduced hospitalisations)³⁰ Healthy Homes Initiatives supporting warm dry housing construction have reduced respiratory illness by improving housing quality, particularly for Māori and Pacific whānau^{31 26}
Smokefree Aotearoa 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Achieved significant reductions in smoking rates across all ethnic groups, including a 24.5 percentage point drop for Māori³², vaping among youth, and sudden Unexpected Deaths in Infancy and Cardiovascular mortality³³ Māori-led initiatives such as wahakura and antenatal wānanga have contributed to lower infant mortality³⁴.
Climate Change and Health	<p>The public health workforce is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessing its impacts on housing, employment, transport, infrastructure, mental health, food security, and water quality³⁵ Developing community adaptation strategies and promoting climate mitigation co-benefits (e.g., active transport, sustainable food systems)³⁶ Ensuring equity in climate responses, particularly for Māori, Pacific, disabled, and rural communities.²⁶

Fiji:

The Fiji [Strategic Plan 2020-2025](#) outlines a comprehensive approach to strengthening public health systems, emphasizing prevention, resilience, and community engagement ³⁷

Government Priority	Role of Public Health (examples of impact)
Reduce Communicable and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) by running NCD campaigns which focus on vulnerable groups, emphasise prevention and early intervention, aim to improve physical and mental well-being, target programs for women, children, and youth, and integrate mental health into primary care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wellness Fiji Campaign promotes early screening and lifestyle changes using the “Rainbow Approach to Healthy Living.” ³⁸ • JP Bayly Trust Screening Program offers BMI, blood pressure, and glucose checks to improve early detection ³⁹
Safeguard Against Environmental Threats and Public Health Emergencies to strengthen health protection and emergency preparedness and address climate-related health risks and disaster response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dengue & Leptospirosis Outbreak Response to support surveillance and community clean-up campaigns ⁴⁰ • PPHSN Network: Strengthens regional surveillance and response to climate-sensitive diseases ⁴¹.
Integrated Public Health Approaches such as a one-system model integrating promotive, preventive, and protective care; supporting community-based health services and environmental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mhGAP Implementation to decentralise <i>mental health services into primary care.</i> ⁴² • CAMH in Primary Care which provide training workshops for child and adolescent mental health ⁴³
Cross-Sector Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MoU with Fiji Meteorological Service in which climate data for health planning is shared to support multi-sectoral partnerships ⁴⁴

Papua New Guinea:

The PNG health sector operates within a decentralized environment. Provincial Health Authorities (PHAs) are now established in all provinces. The vision, mission and goal of the PNG National Health Plan 2021 – 2030 ⁴⁵ are achieved with emphasis on the following Key Result Areas through the PHAs.

Government Priority	Role of Public Health (examples of impact)
Healthier communities through effective engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The public health directorate plays a pivotal role in coordinating and implementing the healthy islands concept

Working together in partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All disease outbreaks are jointly coordinated and implemented by the public health and curative health directorates with clear lines of duties • Epidemiologists and biostatisticians design and run real-time disease surveillance systems to track infectious and chronic disease trends. • All infectious diseases management jointly coordinated and implemented by the public health and curative health directorates with clear lines of duties
Address targeted disease burdens and health priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All vaccination and immunization programs are coordinated and implemented by the public health directorate • Communicable and non-communicable diseases are jointly coordinated and implemented by the public health and curative health directorates with clear lines of duties • All health promotion and prevention programs are coordinated and implemented by the public health directorate

Safeguarding Communities Through Sustainable Public Health Systems

Public health has never been more critical to address challenges in increasingly complex health environments. Government programs aimed at addressing public health challenges cannot succeed without a robust, well-trained public health workforce and sustained investment in education, training, and research.

CAPHIA therefore calls on governments, universities, and communities to commit to strengthening public health capacity and embedding Indigenous and Pacific Nations knowledges to secure resilient, equitable, and sustainable health systems across Australasia and beyond.

Related CAPHIA Position Statements

- [CAPHIA Position Statement: Educating the Public Health Workforce](#)
- [CAPHIA Position Statement: Investing in the Public Health Workforce](#)

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