

Issue No 6

Community Health Review Bulletin

This is the sixth issue in a series of bi-monthly bulletins providing information on the Review of Community Health Services in NSW

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General update

Drafts of the first two reports for the Community Health Review have been received from the Centre for Health Service Development (University of Wollongong).

These reports – *The Evidence Report* and *The State of Play* – are now being considered by the project's Steering Group. Some themes and key issues from the draft reports are outlined briefly in this Bulletin.

The reports are being used to inform completion of the Final Report for the project. This will include options reform and revitalisation in community health.

Community Health Services in NSW: the evidence base

As a key part of the review, the Centre for Health Service Development was commissioned to research and produce a report detailing national and international

evidence about best practice in community health service delivery.

The draft report, *Community health: the evidence base* examines a range of evidence on effective programs and interventions across twenty community health service streams.

The draft report discusses a number of definitions of community health, ranging from that in the current NSW Health *Integrated Primary & Community Health Policy* through to the 1978 Alma Ata Declaration on Primary Health Care. It explores some history in community health in NSW. Community health is also discussed in the international and broader national contexts, with an outline of developments in England, Scotland, New Zealand, Canada and the USA, as well as in other Australian states.



A number of important issues are identified, and which recur in the evidence about effective community health service delivery:

- importance of prevention and early intervention activity,
- the value in adopting a broader, 'social determinants of health' approach,
- the need for effective integration and coordination between community health and other health services,

- the role of community health in helping to manage the growing chronic disease burden, and
- system and capacity issues such as ensuring an appropriate community health workforce, and quality data collections and systems for outcomes and service monitoring, and evaluation.

The draft report recognises that demographic changes, and a different morbidity profile in the community (e.g. an increasing burden of disease and increasing levels of dependency in older people living in the community) means community health services today find themselves in a different context to that of the 1970s and '80s. Activity around "prevention" is more complex than when previous generic services focused on diverting people from residential care or minimising the impact of chronic diseases on individuals and services.

Importantly, there is growing evidence about the cost effectiveness of community-based care compared with hospital care. For some community health service streams there is evidence of better clinical outcomes or at least an equivalent level of care for people.

The draft report offers a useful guidepost for the review, and will help to inform future direction and strategy for community health services in NSW.

Community Health Services in NSW: the state of play

The draft report *Community health: the state of play* is the strength and gap analysis for the Community Health Review.

It provides a picture of community health in NSW today, and identifies key issues and areas for possible reform to be addressed in the Final Report.

The draft report spans the context for community health in NSW today – looking across the NSW Health organisational context, relevant NSW policy, the history of community health and national health reform developments. It looks at the current range of community health services delivered by NSW Health, a number of structural, capacity and systems issues and identifies a range of innovative and good practice initiatives, projects and programs.

Issues identified in the draft report include the following.

- The importance of articulating the future role of community health, including its place within the broader strategic vision for the health system in NSW.
- Determining what community health should look like and how it should be constructed – for example, should it be a set of core NSW Health programs across the state focused more on prevention and early-intervention, a broad range of services delivered mainly by NSW Health, or increasingly delivered in combination with partners in the community including GPs and non-government organisations?
- Community health's role in assisting with management of demand for acute hospital services.
- How best to structure governance and management arrangements for community health.
- Finding the right balance between generalist and specialist services in community health.
- How to improve linkages, partnerships and planning between health professionals, services and programs locally and regionally to enhance service planning and delivery.
- The importance of improving information management and information systems in community health.

- Ensuring that community health in NSW operates as effectively as possible with other parts of the health system, particularly in the context of broader and national health reforms.

Non-Government Organisations and community health services: a comment from NCOSS

Kristie Brown

One of the key challenges facing the NSW Health system is identifying and achieving the right balance between the functions of prevention, early intervention, treatment and emergency/crisis care.

Within this context, reviewing NSW Health operated community health services provides a useful opportunity to consider the current and future role and scope of community health services within the broader NSW health system, which importantly includes non-government services (NGOs), particularly those funded through NSW Health. Whilst relationships vary, NGOs generally work very closely with NSW Health operated community health services.



Feedback received by NCOSS in preparing a submission for the review has identified some broad themes and recommendations relating to the current functions and future directions of community health.

1. Need to reframe the NSW health system

What is needed is the political will and drive to reframe the NSW Health system into one primarily focused on the wellness and

'health' of the population, rather than one geared towards 'sickness' responses. A key component of a wellness approach to health care is a recognition that primary and community health services, including those provided by NGOs, need to be solidly positioned at the centre of the health care system. This requires a considerable policy, political and financial shift towards investment in primary and community services, and a substantial reframing of how health care is delivered.

2. A social view of health

NGOs and NSW Health operated community health services share many common features and have some natural compatibilities within the health system. In particular, the functions and practice of both are more inclined towards a social view of health, that is, a model of health care which takes into account the social, cultural, political and environmental factors that shape the health of individuals and communities (often referred to as the 'social determinants of health'). This is an important point of commonality within a health system often considered to have a lack of respect for non-medical models.

3. NGOs play a complementary function

NGOs play an important and complementary function in the delivery of community-based health services. A prime example can be seen in responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and '90s, when NGOs led the way in a very successful community health response on a public health issue where Governments, and consequently government-based services, faced constraints.

At a general level, NGOs:

- can fill gaps in the delivery of government operated health services,

- do not face the same constraints that government-run health services can in delivering some services, especially where there may be political sensitivity to a particular health issue,
- can have more flexibility and independence in developing and responding to the changing health needs of their clients,
- can gain better access to some people and deliver services more effectively in some areas and with some populations,
- can present better value for money and a more cost-effective service option,
- are often strongly linked with local communities, and draw on a community development framework with a strong consumer and community base, and
- provide a comprehensive response to people with a range of complex needs.

4. Getting the right mix of services

The aim of a review of community health services should be to get the right mix between services provided by clinical programs, NSW Health operated community health services and NGOs. This should consider cost, health outcomes, community participation and engagement and social inclusion at the forefront of thinking. A fundamental element is that it does matter who provides a service, and sometimes NGOs are better placed to provide a service.

5. Integrated planning processes

If a sensible and evidence-based approach is to be used to create the right mix of community health services, better integrated planning processes need to be established, particularly between NSW Health operated community health services and NGOs.

This would provide a number of advantages, including: coordinating services for better consumer pathways; targeting resources to emerging and priority issues; preventing duplication of services;

ensuring that services are prepared for increased demand resulting from public health campaigns; greater involvement of local communities in determining the type and mix of services available; and improving data collection by coordinating NGO and NSW Health data collection systems to support local planning and decision making.

6. A strong role for local communities

Whilst the setting of statewide directions and priorities is important, local planning processes involving strong consumer and community engagement, combined with a local evidence base, should be the driving force behind the delivery of community health services.

Community health services are a vital element of the NSW Health system, and NCOSS is strongly supportive of an increase in the profile and investment of these services.

Next steps...

The Final Report for the Community Health Review is due with NSW Health at the end of 2008.

It will be considered by the Steering Group early in 2009, to inform the preparation of a future direction for community health in NSW.

Further information on the Review can be obtained from:

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