

Thursday, 5 June 2008



For immediate release

The VHA calls for a prevention first approach to health

A radical overhaul of preventative health strategies and new funding models are required to make inroads into Australia's chronic disease epidemic, a peak public healthcare body warns.

The Victorian Healthcare Association's (VHA) chief executive Trevor Carr supports the need for a new National Preventative Health Agency raised by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd this week, following the release of the Final 2020 Summit Report.

But the VHA says it is vital that this body is positioned in the Prime Minister's office to ensure its work is not sidelined and has the ability to influence all government departments, whose decisions impact on health policy.

"The new agency could play a mediating role, ensuring all government policy decisions consider any flow-on consequences for public health," Mr Carr said.

"Acting on social determinants of health to address the health inequalities currently afflicting Australians requires an understanding of the complex policy environment and the numerous factors that shape policy.

"A preventive health agency - acting as an arm of government with a primary purpose of promoting health has merit. However, no single model will be the panacea to health inequities," Mr Carr warned.

The VHA has consistently lobbied for the development of a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) based on local data, linked to areas of health priority.

Mr Carr said these KPIs had the potential to provide an objective measure of how well the health system is meeting the population's health needs and offered a much-needed alternative to the current media fixation with public hospital waiting lists.

"The VHA supports the development of any practical alternatives that improve both the health of the population and the effectiveness of the public healthcare system," Mr Carr said.

"Whilst waiting lists feature regularly in the mainstream media, this focus does nothing to address the underlying problems confronting our public hospital system.

"What is needed is a radical change in approach and a willingness to look at alternative strategies that are both cost-effective and focussed on prevention."

New Zealand has taken a broad health promotion approach in its 2003 *Achieving Health for All People* document, by supporting the role of population health.

Similarly, the VHA believes any Australian agency should have responsibility to ensure that national health promotion activities reach those most in need.

The preventive health agency should deliver more integrated health promotion programs across Australia and better utilize existing expertise and resources to redirect the health system towards prevention.

The VHA believes prevention is the best method to tackle the chronic disease burden confronting the public health system. Illnesses such as Type 2 diabetes, some smoking-related cancers, obesity and cardiovascular disease are preventable, Mr Carr said.

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He called on the Commonwealth Government to undertake a vigorous public consultation period with stakeholders from both inside and outside the health sector. Any model should also incorporate the recommendations of the National Preventive Health Taskforce, chaired by Dr. Rob Moodie.

The VHA is the peak advocacy body representing public healthcare interests in Victoria. Its members include public hospitals, rural and regional health services, community health services and aged care facilities.

For further information and interviews, contact
Trevor Carr
CEO
The Victorian Healthcare Association
(03) 9094 7777 or (0409) 362 382



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