



Public Health Association
AUSTRALIA

Submission to NH&MRC Review of Public Health Research

“Nutbeam Review”

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The PHAA encourages this Review to expand research opportunities in public health by improving the number and size of grants, developing relevant skills for the selection panels, the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research experts in all assessment panels that consider applications for research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, by building capacity and by ensuring adequate infrastructure funding.

Introduction

The Public Health Association of Australia Inc (PHAA) is a national organisation comprising individual members and representing over 40 professional groups concerned to promote health at a population level. This includes, but goes beyond the treatment of individuals to encompass health promotion, prevention of disease and disability, recovery and rehabilitation, and disability support. This framework, together with attention to the social, economic and environmental determinants of health, provides particular relevance to the importance of research in these areas in Australia.

Challenges

The PHAA welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Review. Prevention has been recognised as a key element in improving health outcomes for Australians as indicated by the appointment of the Preventative Health Task Force chaired by Professor Rob Moodie. To name but a few, issues such as reducing inequalities in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, obesity, impact of climate change, the use of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs, the ageing of the population, chronic illness, mental health and environmental health provide key challenges for governments and bureaucracies.

Governments will need to make address these issues in order to avoid widespread illness and impossible economic demands. Policy development and strategic directions will be far more effective if they can be based on evidence. The PHAA uses quality peer-review research to support its policy development and bases its advocacy initiatives and capacity building activities, which are key roles of the PHAA, on such research and associated policy.

Proposals

Recognise the contribution of prevention in improving health

The Public Health Association urges the review to take into account the fundamental importance of prevention in the improvement of health and to fund research accordingly.

The AIHW has revealed that only about 1.8% of all health spending is dedicated to prevention. The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd described this contribution as ‘crazy’ during the 2008 Health Summit at Parliament House. Although the advances in medical technology and medical interventions coming out of research at the tertiary level have been dramatic it is important to recognise that the big health epidemics that are facing Australia are predominately about lifestyle. Research is needed at the primary level. There is an inadequate research and evidence base to inform policy makers about the most

effective interventions with regard to prevention of obesity, the relationship between nutrition and fitness, the action needed with regard to the environment and climate change. More information needs to be gleaned about prevention based on the social determinants of health, specifically vulnerable groups such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, refugees and immigrants.

With the looming exponential increase in chronic disease, the expected health sequelae from the climate change crisis and the increasing gap in health inequalities among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other minority populations, it is imperative to put adequate resources into population health research.

An assessment process that acknowledges the challenges of design in researching public health interventions

There are a number of mediums through which research and interventions in public health are reported. There is a need for grant assessment processes to acknowledge the unique design challenges of population-based intervention research, and consideration be given to those reports which, while not being published in high impact factor national and international journals, significantly change practice in Australia. Such reports could include high calibre reports describing research and intervention studies that are published in non-peer reviewed journals.

The PHAA is responsible for the high calibre peer-review journal *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*. It is our intention to maintain this journal at the high standing that it currently enjoys and hope that it will be appropriately recognised as part of assessment of research competency. However, we also recognise that other forms of reporting provide insight into policy implementation, practice and advocacy.

- While acknowledging the importance of methodologies that produce high level evidence in research, the mechanisms for undertaking public health interventions are frequently more complex than for other forms of medical research.
- Randomised control trials (RCT) may not always be possible – but the research may still be important for understanding, advocacy and policy implementation. In many settings, Observational studies can contribute to an increase in knowledge and understanding and future research.

Adequacy of grants

Implementation of soundly based policies is the key to effective and sustainable public health interventions and the PHAA urges the NH&MRC to take this into account in prioritising funding and making assessments. Therefore, we recommend:

- Research support for early career researchers (post-doctoral fellows)
- Support for the new body of people emerging from the Capacity Building Grants Scheme to be funded beyond these grants
 - It would be short sighted to lose this developing expertise
- Lift the value of the current Personal Support Packages (PSP)

- The job market is becoming more competitive and it is likely that this research capacity will be lost from research in the area of public health.

Recognition of the importance of research that leads to policy implementation

The PHAA bases their policies on available current evidence, evaluations of current research and consultation with experts and uses such evidence-based and grounded policies to support advocacy initiatives aimed at improving outcomes in population health. It recognises the importance of multidisciplinary approaches to the development of population health interventions. In appointing assessment panels, therefore, the PHAA believes it is important to recognise not only the different and complex methodologies that underpin research in this area, but also the importance multidisciplinary expertise and the expertise in the effective and efficient translation of research into policy and practice. A review of constituency of the panels as they specifically relate to the review of population health research applications should be considered. The panel members should include an Indigenous person whenever Indigenous health is being considered. This would build on the work of the Indigenous Health Research Panel and would ensure that the expertise of this group is utilised to its full extent in the review of population health research focussing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. The PHAA would like to be involved in a review of the process for the review of research grant applications, the determination of the skill set of the various review panels and the criteria on which assessments are made with a particular focus on policy implementation and knowledge transfer of the research findings. Such changes will need to be adequately advertised to ensure that researchers are aware to the new approach.

The introduction of a Partner grant scheme is strongly recommended.. Many opportunities exist within the many entities of public health for the development of strong partnerships, particularly with state and local government, as well as Non-Government bodies. However, the guidelines and assessment processes for the grants must be designed in such a way as to be equally accessible by researchers in the field of public health as any other field. A separate stream of partner grants specifically focused on public health research is a suggestion.

We recommend:

- Reviewing the criteria on which assessments are made for population health based research
- Inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research experts in all assessment panels that consider applications for research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations
- Evaluating the research in the context of its potential to lead to better community health outcomes
- Including panel expertise in the area of policy development, research evaluation, advocacy and implementation of research outputs
- Provide an education program to inform potential applicants of the revised approach
- The development of effective partnerships to contribute to the funding of public health research.

Conclusion

The PHAA appreciates the opportunity provided by the NH&MRC through the 'Nutbeam Review' to respond to these important issues. We would also like to acknowledge assistance from Dr Jane Halliday (Australasian Epidemiological Association) and Prof Peter Howat (Curtin University) in the preparation of this submission.

There are many challenges that face public health. The PHAA will continue to work with the NH&MRC to respond to these challenges.

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