Leading public health and community service agencies call for strong and coordinated government leadership to improve the deteriorating health of South Australians

Open Letter September 2017

As a consortium of leading public health expert organisations in South Australia, we are deeply concerned with the worsening health and wellbeing of South Australians, particularly with regard to non-communicable disease and amongst those who live in disadvantaged circumstances. We require greater leadership, strategy, investment and commitment to public health and disease prevention and health promotion activities. We demand urgent action - South Australia must do everything it can to promote and protect health and prevent illness.

The SA Public Health Consortium calls for:

- Strong leadership and visible commitment to public health
- Boosting the position of Chief Public Health Officer to focus on prevention and promotion
- Investment in public health innovation
- Auditing and enforcement of existing public health guidelines in public institutions
- Further investment in the Health in All Policies initiative
- A plan of action that supports all public institutions as health promoting environments

In recent years, we have been concerned by the reduction in workforce capacity in SA, both centrally and in health and community services, following the McCann review and other funding decisions. SA appears to have suffered significantly more than other states. This has led to a lack of focus on and capacity to address the non-communicable disease-related preventable causes of death and disability at the population level, as outlined in the recently released AIHW report (http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=60129556205). This report reminds us that much of the burden is both preventable and experienced disproportionately by those who are living in disadvantaged circumstances.

The state government is responsible for ensuring our community has the opportunity to thrive. Investment in public health has a major role to play in addressing this need. Chronic disease continues to affect one in every two Australians and 63% of adults and 27% of children are overweight or obese. According to the Australian Health Promotion Association every $1 invested in prevention can save up to $5 in future health spending. Strategies that work to decrease disadvantage and improve the environments in which we work, live and play can have a huge impact on health outcomes in the long term. According to Michael Marmot, Director of the UCL Institute of Health Equity and world leader in addressing the determinants of health, this is the first time in 100 years that children will die younger than their parents. We support a health in all policies approach that recognises that our greatest health challenges — for example, non-communicable diseases, health inequities and inequalities, climate change and spiralling health care costs — are highly complex and often linked through the social determinants of health. Any one government sector will not have all the tools, knowledge, capacity, or the budget to address this complexity.

Given the current financial climate, the state cannot afford to wait and we implore the state government and opposition to consider the long term need of the South Australian community and develop a state-wide plan to develop, invest in and evaluate evidence based, preventive health strategies.
The Chief Public Health Officer’s Report 2014-2016 captures some of the ways that public health has a positive impact on our everyday lives. From fluoridated water, developing safer bicycle pathways, smoke free environments and food safety, evidence-based public health strategies have a huge impact on community wellbeing.

The report states “A state of prevention is now critical – South Australia simply cannot afford to rely upon our past achievements and success in public health. If we are to make an impact on addressing the pressures facing our health system, then now, more than ever, a much stronger focus and investment is required on prevention. More than ever we need evidence-based approaches to address the environments and conditions that cause us to get sick in the first place in order to keep people healthier and out of hospital. This cannot be achieved by the health system alone.”

We, the consortium agree that urgent action is required and we invite you to meet with us to further discuss clear, state-wide strategies to improve community health and wellbeing outcomes.

Sincerely,

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