Public Health Association of Australia:
Policy-at-a-glance – Nuclear Weapons Policy

Key message: PHAA will urge the Australian government to:
1. Exclude any role for nuclear weapons in Australia’s military policies and exclude Australian facilities and personnel from any role in military preparations to use nuclear weapons;
2. Sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as soon as feasible.

Summary: Nuclear weapons remain among the most acute existential threat to humanity and the environment on which we depend. The risk of their use, by accident or design, remains as long as nuclear weapons exist. Their eradication is an urgent planetary health imperative. The treaty banning nuclear weapons adopted on 7 July 2017 is an historic step which all governments should support and join.

Audience: Federal Governments, allied organisations and PHAA members.

Responsibility: PHAA’s International Health & Ecology and Environment Special Interest Groups (SIGs).

Date policy adopted: October 2017

Contacts: Jaya Dantas & Brahm Marjadi, Co-Convenors, International Health SIG

          Peter Tait, Convenor, Ecology and Environment SIG
Nuclear Weapons Policy Statement

The Public Health Association of Australia notes that:

1. In July 2017, around 14,930 nuclear warheads were held by China, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, USA and UK. Russia and USA own 92% of them. 4,300 are operationally deployed; nearly 1800 are on alert, ready for use within minutes.¹

2. All nuclear-armed states are in violation of their obligation to disarm. There are currently no negotiations between nuclear-armed states about reducing warheads or curtailing operations and modernisations. Instead, there are signs that deepening crises in South Asia, Europe, the Korean peninsula and the South China Sea are increasing the role of nuclear forces. All the nuclear-armed states reaffirm the importance of their nuclear weapons for the indefinite future and are modernising their nuclear arsenals.² ³ The US, for example, plans to spend US$1 trillion over the next 30 years to upgrade its entire nuclear arsenal and production complex.²

3. The General Assembly of the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) called for the abolition of nuclear weapons in 1997, asserting the threat they pose to human civilisation and the global environment.

4. In 2011 the governing body of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, the world’s largest humanitarian organisation, called on all states “to ensure that nuclear weapons are never again used” and “to pursue... and conclude with urgency and determination negotiations to prohibit the use of and completely eliminate nuclear weapons through a legally binding international agreement”.⁴

5. In 2013 and 2014 the first ever Intergovernmental Conferences on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons agreed that:

   a. Any use of nuclear weapons would be catastrophic;
   
   b. No effective humanitarian response is possible to any nuclear detonation in a population centre;
   
   c. The risk of nuclear weapons use has been underestimated, is growing, and exists as long as the weapons exist; and
   
   d. Nuclear weapons, as the most destructive and indiscriminate of all, are the only weapon of mass destruction not prohibited under international law.⁵

6. Explosion of even a tiny fraction – less than 0.5% - of the global nuclear arsenal would ignite cities, causing abrupt global cooling, darkening and drying; and widespread, severe stratospheric ozone depletion, persisting for over a decade. Drastic sustained declines in food production would put 2 billion people at risk of starvation.⁶ ⁸
7. All other global health progress is in vain if nuclear weapons are used again.

8. By May 2016, 127 governments had endorsed a Humanitarian Pledge “to cooperate with all stakeholders... to stigmatise, prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons in light of their unacceptable humanitarian consequences” to “fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons”. An additional 22 states voted for a resolution bringing the Pledge to the UN General Assembly (UNGA).

9. A special UN Working Group open to all states recommended to the 2016 UNGA to convene a conference in 2017, open to all states, to negotiate a legally-binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination. Treaties unequivocally prohibiting unacceptable weapons and providing for their subsequent elimination have been successful in eliminating other indiscriminate, inhumane weapons – biological, toxin and chemical weapons, antipersonnel landmines and cluster munitions.

10. In April 2016, WFPHA with International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), the World Medical Association (WMA) and the International Council of Nurses (ICN) submitted to the UN Working Group a statement detailing the planetary health imperative to ban and eliminate nuclear weapons.

11. By a majority of over 3 to 1, the UNGA in 2016 voted to implement the recommendations of the Working Group, and on 7 July 2017, the United Nations conference to negotiate a legally-binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their elimination, by a vote of 122 to 1 with 1 abstention, adopted the text of a Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This historic treaty provides a categorical and comprehensive prohibition of nuclear weapons. It opened for signature in New York on 20 September 2017, and will enter into force once 50 states have ratified the Treaty.


13. The Australian governments’ stated commitment to nuclear disarmament is negated by its claim that US nuclear weapons are key to Australia’s national security and prosperity, and the corollary that there are justifiable circumstances in which the Australian government would support their use. The Australian government currently supports only disarmament measures that depend on action by unwilling nuclear-armed states, which have no foreseeable prospects of implementation. Australia has actively opposed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.
PHAA Policy Statement on: Nuclear Weapons Policy Statement

The Public Health Association of Australia resolves to undertake the following actions:

14. PHAA will urge the Australian government to:

   a. Exclude any role for nuclear weapons in Australia’s military policies and exclude Australian facilities and personnel from any role in military preparations to use nuclear weapons;
   
   b. Sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as soon as feasible.

15. PHAA will collaborate with public health and humanitarian partners in educating the public and public health professionals on the imperative to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons.


First adopted at the 1993 Annual General Meeting of the Public Health Association of Australia. The latest revision has been undertaken as part of the 2017 policy review process.
References