Public Health Association of Australia
submission on
Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Standing) Bill 2015
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Introduction

The Public Health Association of Australia

The Public Health Association of Australia Incorporated (PHAA) is recognised as the principal non-government organisation for public health in Australia and works to promote the health and well-being of all Australians. The Association seeks better population health outcomes based on prevention, the social determinants of health and equity principles. PHAA is a national organisation comprising around 1900 individual members and representing over 40 professional groups.

The PHAA has Branches in every State and Territory and a wide range of Special Interest Groups. The Branches work with the National Office in providing policy advice, in organising seminars and public events and in mentoring public health professionals. This work is based on the agreed policies of the PHAA. Our Special Interest Groups provide specific expertise, peer review and professionalism in assisting the National Organisation to respond to issues and challenges as well as a close involvement in the development of policies. In addition to these groups the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health (ANZJPH) draws on individuals from within PHAA who provide editorial advice, and review and edit the Journal.

In recent years PHAA has further developed its role in advocacy to achieve the best possible health outcomes for the community, both through working with all levels of Government and agencies, and promoting key policies and advocacy goals through the media, public events and other means.

Vision for a healthy population

The PHAA has a vision for a healthy region, a healthy nation, healthy people: Living in a healthy society and a sustaining environment, improving and promoting health for all

PHAA’s Mission

Is to be the leading public health advocacy group, to drive better health outcomes through health equity and sound, population-based policy and vigorous advocacy

Priorities for 2014 and beyond

Key roles of the organisation include capacity building, advocacy and the development of policy. Core to our work is an evidence base drawn from a wide range of members working in public health practice, research, administration and related fields who volunteer their time to inform policy, support advocacy and assist in capacity building within the sector. The aims of the PHAA include a commitment to:

- Advance a caring, generous and equitable Australian society with particular respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first peoples of the nation
- Promote and strengthen public health research, knowledge, training and practice
- Promote a healthy and ecologically sustaining human society across Australia, including tackling global warming, environmental change and a sustainable population
- Promote universally accessible people centred and health promoting primary health care and hospital services that are complemented by health and community workforce training and development
- Promote universal health literacy as part of comprehensive health care
- Support health promoting settings, including the home, as the norm
- Assist other countries in our region to protect the health of their populations, and to advocate for trade policies that enable them to do so.
- Promote the PHAA as a vibrant living model of its vision and aims
Preamble

PHAA welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the inquiry into the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Amendment (Standing) Bill 2015. Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act in its current form protects the natural environment from degradation consequent to ill-advised development. A healthy natural environment is fundamental to a healthy society[1]. All public health activities and related government policy should be directed towards reducing social and health inequity nationally and, where possible, internationally.

Health Equity

As outlined in the Public Health Association of Australia’s objectives:

> Health is a human right, a vital resource for everyday life, and a key factor in sustainability. Health equity and inequity do not exist in isolation from the conditions of society that underpin people’s health. The health status of all people is impacted by the social, political, and environmental and economic determinants of health. Specific focus on these determinants is necessary to reduce the unfair and unjust effects of conditions of living that cause poor health and disease.

The PHAA notes that:

- health inequity differs from health inequality. A health inequality arises when two or more groups are compared on some aspect of health and found to differ. Whether this inequality (disparity) is inequitable, however, requires a judgement (based on a concept of social justice) that the inequality is unfair and/or unjust and/or avoidable. Inequity is a political concept while inequality refers to measurable differences between (or among, or within) groups.
- Health inequity occurs as a result of unfair, unjust social treatment – by governments, organisations and people, resulting in macro politico-economic structures and policies that create living and working conditions that are harmful to health, distribute essential health and other public services unequally and unfairly, preventing some communities and people from participating fully in the cultural, social or community life of society.

Social Determinants of Health

The social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including the health system. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels, which are themselves influenced by policy choices. The social determinants of health are mostly responsible for health inequities - the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries.

The determinants of health inequities are largely outside the health system and relate to the inequitable distribution of social, economic and cultural resources and opportunities. Health inequities are the result of the interaction of a range of factors including: macro politico-economic structures and policy; living and working conditions; cultural, social and community influences; and individual lifestyle factors.
This submission – Outline

The PHAA’s opposition to the amendment of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act rests on the amendment removing civil society’s capacity to hold government to account in regard to protecting the environment, in particularly biodiversity. We argue that the environment and the ecosystem functions it provides is a vital determinant of human health and wellbeing.

Any action which detracts from that is to be taken with extreme caution.

1. Interest in ecosystem health beyond the immediate and local

The ecosystem functions which the environment provides humanity are a fundamental determinant of human wellbeing. Figure 1 outlines these functions(1), and their interactions with other components of the systems that provide for human health as a component of overall human wellbeing.

![ECOSYSTEM FUNCTIONS](image)

**Figure 1: The contribution of the ecosystem to human wellbeing**

Iconic vertebrate species (mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish) represent the vaster set of vital invertebrate life forms (insects, worms, etc.) as well as the non-animal world (plants, fungi, protozoa, bacteria, archea) all of whom make up the healthy ecosystem on which humanity depends.

These ecosystem functions provide us with clean air, fresh water, fertile soil, plant pollination, pest control, disease protection, protect habitation from sun, wind, storms and floods, regulate our climate and weather, manage our wastes and pollution, provide resources and sustain our need for spiritual renewal. In their absence we would lack water and food security, be overwhelmed in wastes, and lack the means to create economic prosperity.

The concept of biodiversity is a short hand way of capturing this system. It is this system that the EPBC Act seeks, however imperfectly, to protect.
All humanity and especially members of each nation state such as Australia, have a definite material interest in seeing the environment and biodiversity of which it is a part protected and conserved in order to safeguard our common good and wellbeing over the longer term. Thus exercising the rights that pertain to this interest extend beyond the immediate and local. This right needs to be maintained.

2. Role of civil society in democracy and protecting our common good

In a liberal democracy such as Australia, civil society organisations represent the diversity of interests of the citizens in the whole range of issues that make up our common good. This includes health promotion and environmental protection.

Principles of democracy (Figure 2) include the ability to hold governments to account for their decisions and actions as they impact on the wellbeing of citizens specifically and generally.

Accountability helps promote political equality and to prevent tyranny.

All sections of government including the elected parliamentarians have an interest in having government help accountable AND in being seen to be accountable beyond the electoral cycle. This supports the licence of governments to rule. The ability to seek review of government decisions in the courts is one vital mechanism for accountability to be applied.

Civil society carries this responsibility. It is the sector who can be organised and resourced enough to play this role.

The capacity to be involved in the democratic process is a further determinant of health.

Conclusion

PHAA strongly opposes the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Amendment (Standing) Bill 2015. We are particularly keen that the following points are taken on board by the Inquiry:

- The EPBC Act in its current form helps to ensure the protection of the environment and biodiversity which between them contribute substantially to the prosperity and health which are fundamental to human wellbeing. Thus exercising the rights that pertain to this interest extend beyond the immediate and local. This right needs to be maintained.

- Permitting review in the courts of government decisions by action brought by civil society on behalf of the wider community, all members of whom have a material interest in having transparent and accountable government, is an essential component of our democratic government system and this principle of good government should not be lightly removed.
The PHAA appreciates the opportunity to make this submission and would be happy to discuss this further with the Inquiry should the opportunity present.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information or have any queries in relation to this submission.

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References