

1. The right to good health - addressing inequalities

New Zealanders pride themselves on a “fair go for all”. Yet the opportunity for a healthy life is still linked to social and economic circumstances. Inequalities, such as childhood poverty, mean poorer health, reduced quality of life and early death for many people.

On the whole, New Zealand health statistics compare favourably with most other countries. However, New Zealand’s overall good health is not shared by all New Zealanders. There are substantial and systematic health inequalities that cannot be explained by individual make-up or behaviour.

Poor people die younger than richer people. Māori people die younger than other New Zealanders, above and beyond any socio-economic effect. Men die younger than women.

Health inequalities cost every New Zealander in at least two ways.

- We need good health to participate fully in our society. To systematically restrict the participation of some individuals and groups is to diminish our country.
- Health inequalities are a direct economic cost to all of us. Those people and groups who are disadvantaged carry an excess burden of disease. The direct cost to taxpayers is millions of dollars annually. As relative health inequalities grow, they place considerable financial pressure on the sustainability of the New Zealand health care system and the economy.

2. The value of prevention in saving money and lives

Avoidable diseases and their complications, with their human and financial costs, are a major feature of health inequalities.

Each year the costs of treating avoidable diseases in terms of hospital beds, doctors, nurses and other resources, is equivalent to running Palmerston North Hospital. The health system devotes resources to patching up people who should never have become sick in the first place.

The key to reducing health inequalities is prevention. Prevention works if we put the time and money into it.

Expand and enhance services that promote health and wellbeing

Some preventive health services keep water safe to drink and food safe to eat. Others provide people with information to keep themselves healthy. Health promotion works in communities to build safe and healthy environments and empower action for wellness.

As hospitals become more expensive to run, it becomes even more important to prevent illness where we can. Avoiding trips to hospital is good not only for the individual but also for the economy!

Primary health care services

Affordable primary health care is essential to detect and treat illness early and to help provide essential preventive services such as immunisation. We need an ongoing commitment to a universal primary health care system to ensure fair, affordable primary health services and the best possible health for all New Zealanders. Virtually every New Zealander can now afford to see a doctor on a week day but we need to ensure that people from the country’s poorest homes can also afford GP treatment after hours and during weekends.

3. Taking account of the impact socio-economic issues have on health

The factors that determine health (and health inequalities) are the basic human needs. Extensive research shows that income, employment, poverty, housing, education and community connection affect both the health status of individuals and the community. About 50 percent of variation in health is due to socio-economic differences.

Reducing inequalities requires strong political leadership and a comprehensive whole-of-government response.

All policies (economic, education and housing, applied by central and local government) should be assessed for their impact on health, including the impact on disadvantaged groups. Health Impact Assessment tools are often used overseas. Local tools have been developed for New Zealand and should be used routinely.

We need opportunities for everyone to have good education and training from kindergarten to tertiary levels. Without it, people will not be able to learn how to maintain their own health, and the health of their families. Without education people cannot get work that pays well enough to support a healthy life.

4. The need to protect and improve our environment

The importance of clean water and air, of food free from contamination, of warm, dry shelter and of freedom from environmental poisons, has been known for generations. And the younger generations understand that these things must be delivered sustainably.

But some in New Zealand are still not able to benefit from conditions that are essential for a healthy life.

We need strong regulatory controls so New Zealand ceases to be the world leader in cases of food poisoning. Human and animal sewage must stay out of waterways, and every town needs clean drinking water.

Transport

There is an urgent need for governments to promote the use of public transport, as well as walking and cycling.

The latter two offer greater gains for health than reliance on private motor vehicles, and all three help to reduce carbon emissions.

That involves building more cycle lanes, expanding pedestrian only areas; making roads safer for cyclists and requiring large workplaces to provide shower facilities.

Government agencies also need to expand the use of supervised walking groups of school children in the form of “walking school buses” with priority given to communities with the highest need for affordable transport – ie, low-income and Māori communities.

Use of private motor vehicles could be reduced by user charges, and rewarding car sharing. Limiting urban sprawl would also reduce the need for residents to travel long distances in private motor vehicles to get to work.

Health damage from motor vehicles would be reduced by exhaust emission measures.

Health organisations should develop and promote information on the health impact of transport systems.

Global warming

Global warming has the capacity to destabilise our whole world.

New Zealand must be active nationally and internationally to dramatically (and fairly) reduce global CO2 emissions. It is essential

that the Emissions Trading Scheme be allowed to proceed as quickly as possible.

We must actively prepare for the severe weather events that are the first impacts of global warming and then for the rising sea levels that will affect many in the South Pacific.

Housing

We need affordable, appropriate and accessible housing. Without this we will continue to have high rates of infectious diseases and asthma.

Apart from the health benefits of insulating and draught-proofing houses, there are energy savings to be made as well. Research indicates that insulated homes use on average 20 percent less energy than uninsulated ones. This has the run-on effect of putting more money into people’s pockets.

All tenants of the state are to have their houses retro-fitted within five years. That is most welcome because research has shown that for every one dollar spent in insulating an old, draughty, damp home, there is a two dollar benefit in health cost savings as well as fewer days off work and school.

Private landlords who benefit from the government’s accommodation allowance should be required to follow suit and ensure their tenants live in warm, secure homes.

5. Protecting children to give them a good start

Good health is a basic human right and nowhere should that right be more strictly observed than with our children. We need to protect all our children from harm. Every child counts.

Deprivation in childhood can cause ill health throughout life. To tackle child poverty, all families, irrespective of income source, need an adequate household income to enable a basic standard of living.

We need to reduce child abuse and neglect by making family violence unacceptable and providing appropriate parenting support services.

Substance abuse and addiction are key issues that impact on children. The two major substances of abuse in New Zealand that damage health are alcohol and tobacco.

We need to change the drinking culture. That means tighter enforcement of licensing laws and increased alcohol taxation to fund prevention and treatment. It also means harm reduction approaches with young people, especially Māori. Young women need to know about the dangers of alcohol to babies and children before they become pregnant.

Tax on tobacco should continue to rise, and more of the revenue generated should go to tobacco control programmes, including cessation programmes. There should be individual cessation programmes for each pregnant woman and her partner. Tobacco companies should be publicly accountable for the addictive characteristics of cigarettes and the negative health consequences.

Obesity is another major risk for children. We need to ensure advertising related to food and beverage choices is responsible, especially when aimed at children.

6. The need to view Māori health as a special case

Māori experience systemic and interpersonal discrimination across the life course resulting in wide ranging health disparities. For the goal of health equity, measures to redress the effects of health demoting environments is an urgent priority.

Honouring te Tiriti o Waitangi

Irrespective of any interventions for Māori, based on need, there is an obligation to put in place measures that reflect full commitment to te Tiriti o Waitangi.

The PHA supports funding to Māori controlled services, including the training and recognition of Māori providers.

We support the development, funding and implementation of culturally meaningful and appropriate education programmes for health professionals regarding Māori culture, political and personal health issues.

We favour the development of programmes to encourage Māori self-determination to enable more effective initiatives in employment, education and other areas.

7. The need to provide effectively for the health of other ethnic groups

Pacific peoples, migrants and refugees also have the right to good health and quality services that treat them appropriately.

All health care service delivery and training organisations must recognise the need for cultural competency and include specific training at all levels of education and professional development.

8. The need for a stable structure for health care delivery

We can best summarise this as a plea not to change the structures that deliver health care.

Every time there is a restructuring in the health sector it takes months if not years to re-establish systems and good working relationships. In the meantime opportunities to help people get better and stay healthy are lost. Whomever wins the election, let's NOT have another health system change.

About the Public Health Association

The Public Health Association of New Zealand (PHA) is a voluntary association which provides a major forum for the exchange of information and stimulation of debate about public health in New Zealand. Membership of the PHA is open to all individuals interested in public health and covers more than 300 individual members from the public, private and voluntary sectors. The PHA is a member of the World Federation of Public Health Associations.

Public health can be defined as the improvement of the health of the whole population *'through the organised efforts of society'*¹.

The PHA is funded from membership fees, fundraising, and a contract with the Ministry of Health to encourage and facilitate informed debate on key public health issues, to provide co-ordination for the development of public policy and to enhance development of the public health workforce.

¹ Acheson, D. *Public health in England*. London: HMSO, 1988.

A HEALTHY NEW ZEALAND: TACKLING THE BIG ISSUES

There are eight big issues that should be addressed to build a healthy New Zealand.

1. The right to good health – addressing inequalities
2. The value of prevention in saving money and lives
3. Taking account of the impact socio-economic issues have on health
4. The need to protect and improve our environment
5. Protecting children to give them a good start
6. The need to view Maori health as a special case
7. The need to provide effectively for the health of other ethnic groups
8. The need for a stable structure for health care delivery

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