

Community health focus of Hamilton meeting

16 February 2008

Having healthy communities will be a focus of many attending a workshop in Hamilton on 20 February to discuss the Public Health Bill. The Bill, which is currently before Parliament's Health Select Committee, seeks to review and update the Health Act 1956.

The workshop, which is being supported by the Waikato District Health Board, is being convened by the Public Health Association (PHA) and is among several being held around the country to discuss the Bill.

PHA National Executive Officer Dr Gay Keating says the Public Health Bill is the most significant public health legislative reform for decades.

"The new Bill will allow for the management of a wide range of risks to people's health including some provisions relating to illnesses such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease. However, the focus will continue to be on diseases you can catch. Some of these you can catch from other people – for example, hepatitis, tuberculosis, acute gastroenteritis. Others you can catch from the environment around you such as drinking water or poorly controlled sewage.

"Under the existing Health Act, health officers have limited ability to protect the community from communicable diseases. If someone is deliberately spreading a disease like hepatitis, for example, their workmates are currently not able to be warned because of privacy issues.

"On the other hand the old law often used a sledgehammer to crack a walnut. The new proposals include much better protection of the rights of sick people by requiring the health authorities to use the least restrictive options and increasing appeal provisions.

"The Public Health Bill seeks to better balance individual rights and privacy issues with the rights of the community to not be exposed unnecessarily to ill health."

She says the Bill, if passed, would also result in a better balance between health and profits.

"Currently, the balance is tipped in favour of big business, enabling them to make money while the health of New Zealanders suffers. The ongoing advertising of fast food to children is a good example of this.

"The Bill would enable action to be taken, giving health priority over the profits of industry."

Dr Keating says strong public health measures are essential if people are to live healthy lives.

“Without strong public health laws we would live in a country in which it was perfectly OK for people to drink and drive, be exposed to asbestos at work, to have raw sewage running in the drains, eat food from cockroach-infested restaurant kitchens, drink contaminated water, place children in vehicles unrestrained, and dump rubbish in the school playground.

“The Public Health Bill will bring public health legislation into the 21st century, so we can continue to protect the health of our communities.”

The meeting is being held on Wednesday 20 February in Population Health Service meeting room, Hugh Monkton Trust Building, Rostrevor Street, Hamilton, 10am-4pm.

If you would like to attend or want more information please contact Debbie Petersen on debzp@xtra.co.nz 07 871 9968 by Monday 18 February.

Gay Keating can be contacted on 0273 414 708.

The PHA website is www.pha.org.nz.

The Public Health Association of New Zealand is a non-party political voluntary association, which provides a major forum for the exchange of information and stimulation of debate about public health in New Zealand.