

TASKFORCESUBMISSION: submission

NAME: Susan Rooney

POSITION: Chief Executive Officer

ORGANISATION: Cancer Council Western Australia

SUBMISSION1: Australians are healthier and living longer than ever. All the same, too many people die from chronic diseases that can be prevented through a healthier lifestyle or cured if detected early enough.

Over the last century there has been enormous improvement in the health of Australians largely due to progress in controlling infectious and chronic diseases. There are, however, worrisome signs that these trends may reverse over time.

Major reports and studies by Australian government and other reputable agencies clearly show population growth and ageing will contribute to significant increases in new cases of chronic diseases and add to pressures on an already overstretched public health system.

The rapid rise in obesity in Australia has been well documented in adults from several national surveys since 1980. It is also undoubtedly one of the biggest health threats facing Australian children with projections that the rise in obesity may result in future generations of Australians having a shorter lifespan than their parents.

Binge drinking has become an epidemic among the young with a survey by the Alcohol Education Rehabilitation Foundation revealing at least one third of 18-24 year old Australians consider themselves to be binge drinkers and that 41 per cent of young people surveyed have drunk so much they've passed out on at least one occasion.

Additionally, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has shown that, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are less likely than non-Indigenous Australians to drink alcohol, those who do so are more likely to drink at dangerous levels.

And, despite tremendous progress in reducing the use of tobacco over the last 30 years, 2.9 million Australians smoke, thousands of children take up the habit each year and in some communities the rates of smoking haven't even begun to decline.

While there has undoubtedly been significant improvement in the health of Australians over the decades, it is clear there is urgent need for governments to step up efforts and put the prevention of illness at the forefront of health care.

The National Preventative Health Strategy represents a significant and long overdue paradigm shift in health care.

We strongly support the approaches and measures outlined in the discussion paper, and believe it provides a firm basis for the National Preventative Health Strategy.

In finalising the strategy and planning for its implementation, it is essential that it be:

Single-minded: The Australian Government must be resolute in achieving our shared goal of “Australia: the healthiest nation by 2020”. Most important of all public health concerns should take precedence over commercial interests in deciding actions to take that will provide the greatest benefits to the health of the population.

Truly national: The multiplicity, and poor coordination, of federal and state policies in public health can be confusing and oft times lead to needless competition for attention and resources, and inconsistencies in approaches and messages. This is an ongoing frustration for those working in and with the health sector, but it is also a major barrier to engaging sectors outside the health sector.

Comprehensive: No single strategy in and of itself will bring about the population-wide changes in attitudes, behaviours and the built environment needed to make us “the healthiest country”. The Strategy must be comprehensive in its approach encompassing education, community organisation and development, legislation, fiscal and public policy, monitoring and research. Actions should not only be directed at strengthening the skills and capabilities of individuals, but also towards changing social, environmental and economic conditions so as to alleviate their impact on public and individual health.

Just: As a nation, we are eating more and moving less, smoke too much and drink to excess. The Strategy offers an unprecedented opportunity to make a real difference to the health and wellbeing of all Australians, and most importantly redress unacceptable and longstanding inequalities in health and living conditions for the poorest and most vulnerable in our community.

Robust: The Strategy will no doubt be based on the best available evidence, but it must also recognise the need for the trialling of innovations and the acceptability of informed expert consensus where the evidence for particular measures is limited or non-existent.

Forward-looking: The Strategy must be adaptable to changing circumstances and have capacity for innovation and trialling of new approaches that will add to the burgeoning body of evidence of effective measures for improving the health and wellbeing of individuals, groups and the broader population.

Makes things happen: It is vital that the Strategy does not languish as a set of idealistic recommendations on improving the health of the nation. Most of all, it must be transformed into a properly funded and sustained plan of action that makes clear what needs to be done, by whom and by when.

Our Nation is founded on principles of freedom, fairness and cooperation. Australian Governments have a moral obligation to build community support and capacity to enjoy good health, particularly among those who are most vulnerable and have least capacity to make the choices and changes in their lifestyle or living conditions that might improve and protect their health: the very young, the old, the poor and the disenfranchised.

We applaud the Federal Government for its commitment to addressing the rising epidemic of chronic and preventable illness and look forward to the release and rapid implementation of what we dearly hope will be a truly national and comprehensive National Preventative Health Strategy that is just, robust and forward-looking.

PRIVACY: yes

SUBMIT: Submit