

NATIONAL PREVENTIVE HEALTH STRATEGY

Response to the Consultation Paper

September 2020

ABOUT RESEARCH AUSTRALIA

We are the national peak body representing the whole of the health and medical research pipeline.

Our vision: Research Australia envisions a world where Australia unlocks the full potential of its world-leading health and medical research sector to deliver the best possible healthcare and global leadership in health innovation.

Our mission: To use our unique convening power to position health and medical research as a significant driver of a healthy population and contributor to a healthy economy.

Our goals:

Engage

Australia in a conversation about the health benefits and economic value of its investment in health and medical research.

Connect

researchers, funders and consumers to increase investment in health and medical research from all sources.

Influence

government policies that support effective health and medical research and its routine translation into evidence-based practices and better health outcomes.

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NATIONAL PREVENTIVE HEALTH STRATEGY

RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION PAPER

Introduction

The Australian Government is developing a 10-year National Preventive Health Strategy (the Strategy). Research Australia has responded to the Consultation paper on the draft National Preventive Health Strategy. The National Preventive Health Strategy is anticipated to be finalised and released in early 2021.

Research Australia welcomes the creation of a National Preventive Health Strategy. Preventive health is a key pillar of the Australian Government's Long Term National Health Plan, and is deserving of a greater focus than it has received in the past.

The Consultation has been undertaken using an electronic survey, and Research Australia's response to each of the questions posed by the surveys is provided below. Our responses emphasise:

- the critical role of research in developing new preventive health measures;
- the need to focus on implementation and scalability as part of translating research findings into new and effective preventive health programs; and
- the critical role of data in evaluating the effectiveness of programs.

Responses to Survey Questions

Vision and Aims of the Strategy

Question: Are the vision and aims appropriate for the next 10 years?

Why or why not?

Research Australia response:

The Vision and Aims are broadly appropriate. The reference to wellbeing in the Aims and elsewhere in the document is somewhat confusing. At one point, the document states 'Health is not just the presence or absence of disease or injury – more holistically, it is a state of wellbeing.' If a distinction is being made between health and wellbeing this should be articulated. Otherwise, perhaps the reference should only be to health, with an explanation once in the document that health is defined to encompass wellbeing.

Goals of the Strategy

Question: Are these the right goals to achieve the vision and aims of the Strategy. Why or why not? Is anything missing?

Research Australia response:

The goals are generally the right goals.

Goal 4 *Communities across Australia will be engaged in prevention* includes workplaces but does not specifically reference the private sector. While the goal includes a role for workplace activity, and this activity may be supported by employers, the Strategy does not appear to include the active engagement of the private sector in supporting health prevention. This seems an anomaly, particularly in an environment in which, for example, companies are increasingly aware of the environmental impacts of their activities and responding by changing their products and behaviours.

Engaging companies in health prevention, for not just their employees and in their workplaces but for their customers and all Australians, would appear to be an opportunity that is missed by this Strategy. Examples include considering encouraging physical activity in the design of new residential estates, companies choosing to use healthier ingredients in food manufacturing, or promoting healthier options in retail outlets.

Goal 5 *Individuals will be enabled to make the best possible decisions about their health* should be amended to '*Individuals will be enabled and supported to make the best possible decisions about their health.*' Research Australia undertakes annual opinion polling. One of the findings of our polling is that many people believe (rightly or wrongly) that they **know** what they need to do to be healthy but that they are looking for '**practical strategies**' and '**tips or hints**' on what they can do to maintain their health.¹ This can be as simple as providing information in a way

¹ Research Australia, Australia Speaks! 2019 Opinion Poll, at <https://researchaustralia.org/reports/public-opinion-polling-2/>

which supports taking particular actions (e.g. walking to the shops rather than driving your car) or much more developed and extensive, such as weight loss programs.

Research Australia submits that while enabling people can be as simple as giving them the information, we believe supporting people to make the best possible decisions is a subtle but important distinction which will improve both the acceptability of the goal to Australians and its effectiveness.

Mobilising a Prevention System

Question: Are these the right actions to mobilise a prevention system?

Research Australia response:

All of the seven enablers are required, but Research Australia submits there is one which is missing. Under the enabler [Research and evaluation](#), the comment is made in the Consultation paper that ‘There is a need for stronger partnerships between researchers and policy makers to improve the translation of evidence.’

Research Australia agrees that we need to improve the translation of evidence, but doing so requires more than better relationships between researchers and policy makers. Research Australia submits that there should be an additional, related enabler: [Implementation and scaling](#). The addition of this enabler provides recognition that the implementation and scaling of research initiatives is a separate and equally critical endeavor to undertaking research and evaluation. It would focus attention on the activities that are required to enable the research outputs to be translated into outcomes that can lead to impact, such as new clinical guidelines, changes to government policies, more effective public health messaging and other public health initiatives. This eighth enabler requires its own focus and resources if research is to be translated into effective, large scale and ongoing programs as part of a more effective and integrated prevention system.

Boosting Action in Focus Areas

Question: Where should efforts be prioritised for the focus areas?

Research Australia response:

Research Australia submits that each of the six focus areas should have a research program directed to improving the effectiveness of the current prevention measures and/or strategy. For example, in relation to cancer screening, research could be directed at improving screening rates in at-risk communities with relatively low rates of screening. In reducing alcohol and other drug-related harm, the focus might be on evaluating which interventions, and which combination of interventions, is most cost effective.

As mentioned earlier, Research Australia submits there should also be an emphasis in each focus area on the implementation and/or scaling up of interventions and programs that are demonstrated to be effective through in-built and ongoing evaluation.

Continuing Strong Foundations

Question: How do we enhance current prevention action?

Research Australia response:

Research Australia submits that the first step to enhancing current prevention action is collecting the data that enables us to understand how effective current programs are and why. The collection of data to inform evaluation remains a challenge in many areas and warrants improvement as a platform to support all preventive health measures.

Evaluation of this data is the second step, and an area that requires further resources. Undertaking this evaluation enables the development of further potential improvements, which can, in turn be tested and evaluated for effectiveness.

Finally, and as referred to earlier, we need to invest resources in the implementation and scaling up of interventions that have been demonstrated to be effective, and disinvest in less effective and/or cost effective measures.

Additional feedback/comments

Question: Any additional feedback/comments?

Research Australia response:

Research Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of this National preventive Health Strategy. Preventive health measures provide an opportunity to substantially improve health outcomes for all Australians. Engaging individuals as consumers is key but there is also a role for engaging the whole of our community, including business, because we all benefit from a healthier community. Evaluation should be an integral part of the Strategy and all preventive health programs, and the routine collection of data to support evaluation should be incorporated as a key element of the Strategy.

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