

Promoting health is on everybody's agenda

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A report commissioned by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) has found that 85 per cent of Victorians interviewed think health should be the top government spending priority.

The Public Attitudes to Health Promotion and Disease Prevention survey is believed to be the first Australian report which examines community knowledge of, and support for, both health promotion and disease prevention. The study, which comprised 1000 telephone interviews, also found that nine in ten people surveyed supported spending public money on health promotion.

The report coincides with an analysis of health trends which shows Victorians are living longer, but a disturbing rise in chronic diseases can greatly impact on our quality of life in later years. The research, by VicHealth Senior Research Fellow Dr Anna Peeters, of Monash University confirms that a significant proportion of these chronic illnesses that are on the increase, are preventable.

“The studies suggest we need both a comprehensive approach to tackle the causes of chronic disease and also that the community supports wide-ranging action to tackle the health issues confronting us,” explains VicHealth Chief Executive Officer Todd Harper.

In November 1987, a bold and innovative experiment in health promotion was agreed upon by Members of Parliament when they passed the Victorian Tobacco Act. The Act was groundbreaking in that it booted tobacco sponsorship out of sport and the Arts and created the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, which used revenue generated from tobacco sales to promote health and support tobacco control.

The parliamentary debates leading up to the vote have been described as “...cathartic and tumultuous”. Politicians of the day have remarked that ...“a number of people hoped that it (VicHealth) would also be a body that could be a pace-setter in other public health initiatives...a respected leader and an advocate - quite an unusual one, because it enjoyed multi-partisan support.”

Twenty years on, Victorians are reaping the benefits from that bold vision: a model that dedicates a sustained budget, brings together evidence, and brokers many partnerships across government and the community to focus on preventing illness.

So how have Victorians benefited from having a dedicated funding stream for health promotion?

Some standout achievements include:

- widespread controls on the marketing of tobacco, legislation to restrict where people can smoke and significant reductions in smoking rates across the population;
- significant changes in the way community sport and active recreation are managed and promoted, which has helped reverse the trend to lower rates of participation;
- making the link between social and economic marginalisation and mental ill health, and developing a better understanding of how to reduce the prevalence of mental ill health;
- declining rates of deliberate sun exposure, and a levelling off of skin cancer prevalence;
- substantial investment in Victoria's public health research workforce, resulting in Victoria being recognised as a leading state in this area.

“VicHealth and its many partners have had considerable success in some critical areas of health and wellbeing, but we cannot be complacent, and the challenges facing us are more complex than ever,” explains VicHealth Chief Executive Todd Harper.

The story of our health over this past 20 years is about major wins countered by significant setbacks. We have seen large cultural shifts in the areas of smoking and the consumption of specific foods, but we have seen no overall improvement in increased physical activity levels, and a worsening in the difference in the health status of the richest and the poorest Victorians. In addition, much remains to be done in this time of rising levels of alcohol consumption among children.

Australia invests less than two per cent of its health budget in health promotion. This figure has changed little in the last 40 years, despite about 40 per cent of deaths being caused by preventable illness.

“The case for investment in public health interventions must be supported by good evidence,” Mr Harper says. “But the runs are clearly on the board and VicHealth will continue make the case by investigating, funding, monitoring, reporting and evaluating public health programs that provide cost-effective solutions.”

“Small shifts in population behaviour mean big savings in health budgets. For example, programs to reduce tobacco consumption over the last 30 years cost \$176 million, but reduced health care costs by at least \$500 million and created benefits worth \$8.4 billion.”

Beyond Victoria, VicHealth has chartered new frontiers in health promotion. Since its inception, VicHealth has supported other countries attempting to start up health promotion foundations and it is a founding member of the International Network of Health Promotion Foundations, established in Melbourne in 1999.

Speaking at the 6th Global Conference on Health Promotion in Bangkok in August 2005, the then Director-General of the World Health Organisation, Dr Lee Jong-wook said, “There are never enough human and financial resources for health promotion, but there are always new approaches and methods to increase our options. The global health promotion foundation network, which has its origins in the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation of Australia, is a good example, which has now spread to many other countries.”

Looking forward, VicHealth’s Chair, Jane Fenton AM says, “The challenges involved in promoting health will only increase as time goes on – as will the necessity for an innovative, effective and committed VicHealth, that continues to work with governments and the community to identify how best to respond to the complex health challenges of modern life.”

“As the majority of those surveyed in the Public Attitudes report indicate, while individuals have to take full responsibility for their own health, governments have the main role to play in promoting good health,” Mr Harper concludes.