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**Public Health Physicians:  
Protecting, Promoting and Improving  
Health for the Whole Community  
November 2020**

## About the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP)

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) trains, educates and advocates on behalf of over 18,000 physicians and 8,500 trainee physicians, across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The College represents a broad range of medical specialties including general medicine, infectious diseases, paediatrics and child health, cardiology, respiratory medicine, neurology, oncology, public health medicine, occupational and environmental medicine, palliative medicine, sexual health medicine, rehabilitation medicine, geriatric medicine, and addiction medicine. Beyond the drive for medical excellence, the RACP is committed to developing health and social policies and contributing to health reforms and innovations which bring vital improvements to the wellbeing of patients.

The RACP has a key commitment to develop and implement strategic initiatives that effectively contribute to improved health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and Māori. The [RACP Indigenous Strategic Framework](#) supports the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#) and presents the College priorities to:

- Contribute to addressing Indigenous health equity differences;
- Grow the Indigenous physician workforce;
- Equip and educate the broader physician workforce to improve Indigenous health;
- Foster a culturally safe and competent College;
- Meet the new regulatory standards and requirements of the AMC and MCNZ.

## About the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine

The Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine (AFPHM) is a Faculty of the RACP. It provides training and continuing education for Public Health Medicine Fellows and Trainees. As described in the Statement of Purpose (2014), the Faculty:

- seeks excellence in public health medicine, education and practice to achieve the highest levels of health for the populations of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. AFPHM does this through the training and continuing professional development of public health physicians, the promotion of public debate on matters of public health and the encouragement of public health research.
- is committed to achieving a high standard of population health in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand by facilitating continuous improvement in the training, assessment and continuing professional development of public health medicine practitioners in Australia and New Zealand; promoting the study of, research into, and evidence-based policy and practice of all matters related to public health and acting as an authoritative body for the purpose of consultation in matters of education or public interest in the field of public health medicine.
- recognises the unique position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia's, and Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand's, culture and history. The Faculty is committed to seeking equity in the partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people of Australia and Māori of New Zealand in ways that recognise their distinctive cultural and legal rights and the different social and administrative contexts within which they live, including the specific guarantees of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the Faculty supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart in Australia.

You can learn more about AFPHM's mission and vision by reading the complete [Statement of Purpose](#).

As this is an Australian document, the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander will be used to describe the First Peoples of Australia, except in the above section which includes Māori peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand.

# Public Health Physicians: Protecting, Promoting and Improving Health for the Whole Community

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## Purpose

*Public health physicians: protecting, promoting and improving health for the whole community*

This position statement has been written for decision makers in Australia responsible for workforce planning, funding, and strategy in health. It describes the skills, expertise and roles of Public Health Physicians to inform decisions about public health workforce mix and has been endorsed by the Council of the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine (AFPHM).

The purpose of this document is to articulate the value of Public Health Physicians credentialled as Fellows of the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine (FAFPHMs) to the contemporary public health workforce and their capacity to contribute to the broader health system.

The document explains the training and expertise of Public Health Physicians and describes their unique skills in promoting and protecting the health of the Australian people. It is intended to inform health system decision makers in their strategic and workforce planning.

## Overview

Public Health Physicians are medical graduates who, through their advanced training, are medical specialists in protecting and improving the health of whole populations, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. Public Health Physicians are trained to solve complex health problems and make sound evidence-based decisions at a systems-level. They work towards the equitable attainment of health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being for all. Public Health Physicians are medical specialists with a duty of care for populations rather than individuals.

Public Health Physicians have unique skills in collaboration, communication, evidence-gathering, research and evaluation for population impact. Their training combines their experience in clinical medicine with specialist fields relevant to the health of populations, including:

- Responding to communicable disease outbreaks and environmental health threats
- Implementing strategies to prevent chronic disease, injury and mental illness
- Conducting research to improve understanding of epidemiology and factors influencing health
- Developing policies that improve the health of the population and move towards health equity

Because of their training and professional expertise, Public Health Physicians hold senior medical positions in state and territory health departments, research, non-government organisations, and the private sector. In these roles, they are responsible for activities to protect and promote population health, including service delivery and strategic reform.

The work of Public Health Physicians is embedded within the social determinants of health, acknowledging the upstream influences on individual and population health through factors such as the physical, economic, cultural and social environment where people live and work. As a result, public health work is complex, multidisciplinary and collaborative.

## Professional expertise and training

Public Health Physicians complete a specialist medical training program through the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (the RACP) which requires attainment of competencies to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; to analyse public health issues based on the perspective, rights and status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and to actively seek opportunities to eliminate institutional racism. Prospective registrars are eligible to apply for advanced training with the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine (AFPHM) after they have completed at least three years of clinical work and have already obtained a Master of Public Health degree or equivalent. Registrars then undertake a three-year full-time equivalent advanced training program with supervised rotations across a range of disciplines such as:

- Health leadership and advocacy
- Health policy

- Health protection and promotion
- Epidemiology
- Surveillance
- Communicable disease control
- Education
- Research
- Environmental health

Public Health Medicine Fellowship is awarded upon demonstration of competencies through workplace-based assessments, research and project reports and, finally, on passing the exit oral specialty examination undertaken towards the end of training.

As Fellows of the AFPHM, Public Health Physicians adhere to the RACP's Continuing Professional Development (CPD) framework which requires annual participation in education, performance review and measurement of professional outcomes. Fellows are recognised as medical specialists by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) and comply with AHPRA requirements for maintaining professional competence.

Through life-long learning and reflective practice, Public Health Physicians continue to improve their cultural competency skills throughout their careers, ensure cultural safety and advance de-colonisation as supporting partners to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, following the RACP Indigenous Strategic Framework.

This combination of training under accredited specialist supervision, robust assessment against rigorous criteria, and mandatory CPD means that Public Health Physicians are credible authorities in many different settings and skilled to ensure integrated, systems-level responses to population health issues and health service delivery.

## The value of Public Health Physicians in a complex and dynamic health system

### Leadership, collaboration and solutions for complex population health challenges

Complex, challenging problems that confront populations and sub-population groups require leadership, broad collaboration, and accountability. Public Health Physicians are trained to solve complex problems by working in and leading multidisciplinary teams. This enables Public Health Physicians to:

- Consider complex sets of factors and the merits, harms and costs of alternative strategies
- Take responsibility for agreed courses of action
- Communicate effectively to explain complex health information with different audiences
- Recognise and support self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, their history, strengths and holistic concepts of health and illness
- Build collaborations, with clinical peers and professionals in other disciplines including food and water supply, toxicology, urban planning, transport systems, environmental protection, education and ethics
- Build cross-sectoral understandings and collaborations to provide strategic vision

### Supporting populations and health systems

Public Health Physicians assess the overall health of populations and their health needs, bringing their perspective as health systems specialists. This expertise enables Public Health Physicians to:

- Scan changing environments to identify emerging health threats and risks
- Strengthen health systems to take a proactive approach to reducing negative health impacts
- Undertake research and evaluate evidence; understand and use data judiciously to guide policy and practice

- Advocate effectively for priority populations recognising the broadest determinants of health, also recognising the importance of solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through effective partnerships in which their peoples take the lead
- Manage communicable diseases, non-communicable diseases, and environmental health threats to protect population health
- Apply 'systems thinking' and change management
- Utilise the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013 – 2023<sup>1</sup>

## Integration of medical and public health expertise

Public Health Physicians complete compulsory training in the fundamentals of clinical medicine and acquire postgraduate qualifications in public health before undertaking advanced training in diverse settings and at various levels of the health system where public health is practised. This unique integration enables them to act as translators across the health landscape from primary to tertiary care and in research organisations and government, from the grassroots to senior government policy.

This combined clinical and population health expertise enables Public Health Physicians to:

- Work across government portfolios to better understand and address population health issues including socioeconomic differentials in health outcomes; risk behaviours such as poor diet, tobacco use; and structural factors such as institutional racism which adversely affect health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other culturally and linguistically diverse populations
- Use expertise in evidence gathering and assessment to translate study findings and situate these within the pre-existing evidence-base to guide policy and practice
- Provide technical expertise in health departments and to clinical services which are frequent first contact points for cases of infectious diseases with epidemic potential such as COVID-19, measles, Ebola and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome
- Provide expert advice on the development of immunisation schedules, investigation of outbreaks, infection prevention and control, case management and contact tracing to primary and secondary healthcare providers, health managers and government
- Support emergency response and disaster management, particularly the health effects of natural disasters
- Manage environmental health risks, including leading action on prevention and mitigation of the health impacts of climate change
- Plan health services and systems to respond to emerging non-communicable diseases and demographic concerns, including childhood obesity and ageing populations

## Evidence-based health systems and public health interventions

Public Health Physicians have been at the forefront of leading policy reforms and interventions to transform population health in ways that are evidence-based and cost-effective. This expertise enables Public Health Physicians to:

- Investigate health issues using a wide range of disciplinary methods and specific techniques, such as: undertaking literature/systematic reviews and evaluation, managing data collection, performing analyses and using quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods approaches
- Support Indigenous research methodologies and data sovereignty
- Plan, interpret and explain health information
- Design and evaluate health information systems for disease monitoring, screening and measuring health outcomes
- Develop standards and identify cost-effective ways to improve practice
- Evaluate health services and programs and recommend improvements
- Interpret conflicting or incomplete evidence for planning
- Integrate best practice, efficient programs into health care policies and practices

## Equity in health policies

Equity is at the heart of the discipline of public health medicine. Public Health Physicians work to balance the health needs of differing groups within the community to advocate that resources are distributed equitably. This requires a high level of skill in stakeholder management to engage constructively with decision makers, including politicians, senior executives and other community leaders.

Public Health Physicians can be strong and influential advocates within the health system for populations experiencing health inequities, including culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Public Health Physicians consider health equity to be a fundamental principle of service design, implementation, program evaluation and health system reform. This expertise enables Public Health Physicians to:

- Identify and manage health inequity with different population groups
- Promote and explain the social, cultural, economic, and environmental determinants of health and the systemic pressures which influence health outcomes
- Facilitate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in all aspects of health policy and practice
- Advocate for and lead changes to policy to improve health outcomes and reduce inequity

## Statutory health protection and disease prevention

Public Health Physicians hold statutory responsibilities because the protection of public health is a key role of government. Fulfilling these obligations requires specialised medical knowledge and capacity to manage high-risk, time-pressured situations. This expertise enables Public Health Physicians to:

- Lead multidisciplinary teams to manage disease outbreaks and other public health emergencies
- Communicate urgent health messages precisely and effectively
- Protect communities from existing and emerging health risks through implementation of State and Territory Public Health Acts or similar legislation
- Assess and inform the development of safe, cost-effective immunisation schedules
- Design and implement systems to reduce prevalence and impact of chronic health conditions and injuries
- Monitor and provide accurate health advice on safety and quality of food, water, air and other environmental factors including climate change

## Impact

Public Health Physicians remain critical to population health in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are trained to lead complex change management including health promotion and disease prevention, systems reform, strategic planning, and performance monitoring required to meet health needs. Public Health Physicians are trained for leadership roles in the health system, including statutory health protection and disease prevention; integration of social equity and health; and promoting evidence-based health decisions.

Notable public health interventions led by Public Health Physicians over the years have significantly improved the health of Australians. Of the top 10 public health successes identified by the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA)<sup>2</sup>, Public Health Physicians made significant contributions as policy leaders, practitioners and researchers to the following:

- folate supplementation, leading to a reduction in neural tube defects
- immunisation, leading to control and elimination of some communicable diseases
- reducing infections with Human papillomavirus (HPV) and its related cancers through cervical screening and HPV vaccination
- control of HIV in Australia
- the Slip! Slop! Slap! Campaign for reducing the incidence of skin cancer, and
- research and advocacy to reduce the number of people with smoking-related illnesses.

Other demonstrations of Public Health Physician impact include:

- At the turn of the twentieth century, about 300 Australians died of measles each year. Due to the development of a measles vaccine and accompanying public health campaign to ensure that over 90% of people are vaccinated, there is now less than one measles death per year<sup>3</sup>.
- In 1900, acute rheumatic fever (ARF) rates were high among all Australian children. Subsequent public health improvements in housing standards, reductions in overcrowding particularly in poor urban slums, and affordable access to primary health care eliminated ARF in non-Indigenous populations. Due to on-going housing inequity however, ARF remains endemic in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Public Health Physicians have joined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to address this housing injustice and resolve environmental health inequities.
- In 1982, the incidence of lung cancer in Australian men was 85.2 per 100 000; by 2015 the incidence had reduced to 52.8 per 100 000. This is a result of tobacco control efforts, in which Public Health Physicians were instrumental, that reduced male smoking rates from over 60% to less than 20% within three decades<sup>4</sup>.
- The current global COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the essential role of Public Health Physicians in Australia's response as corroborated by Dr Brendan Murphy, Secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Health to the Australian Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 in August 2020<sup>5</sup>.

The leadership of Public Health Physicians will continue in these and other strategies to improve population and public health in Australia. Public Health Physicians are a vital component of the health workforce. In the future, Australia's population faces new, urgent and inevitable health challenges including climate change, increasing globalisation, food supply issues, changing disease patterns, and Western lifestyle epidemics. Public Health Physicians will continue to be at the forefront of ensuring effective leadership, advocacy and better health outcomes for all.

Further information about the role, scope of practice and supply of Public Health Physicians in Australia can be found in the final report of an extensive workforce planning study undertaken in 2017 '[Planned and unplanned futures for the Public Health Physician Workforce in Australia - A labour market analysis for the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine](#)' and the 2010 '[The Unique Contributions of Public Health Physicians to the Public Health Workforce final report](#)'.

AFPHM recommends that senior decision makers review the composition of their workforce and ensure it contains the necessary complement of Public Health Physicians to optimise outcomes. To ensure population health improvements throughout Australia, health leaders should identify and address critical gaps in public health expertise and provide effective postgraduate training and succession plan pathways.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Australian Government, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023, [https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/B92E980680486C3BCA257BF0001BAF01/\\$File/health-plan.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/B92E980680486C3BCA257BF0001BAF01/$File/health-plan.pdf)
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- <sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018). Measles in Australia. Vaccine-preventable diseases fact sheets. Cat no. PHE 236. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra. Available from: [https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/c828baef-75d9-4295-9cc9-b3d50d7153a2/aihw-phe-236\\_Measles.pdf.aspx](https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/c828baef-75d9-4295-9cc9-b3d50d7153a2/aihw-phe-236_Measles.pdf.aspx)
- <sup>4</sup> National Cancer Control Indicators (2019). Aged-standardised incidence by sex, 1982 to 2015. Available from: <https://ncci.cancer australia.gov.au/diagnosis/cancer-incidence/cancer-incidence>
- <sup>5</sup> Senate Select Committee on COVID-19: Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, transcript from 21 August 2020: <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=COMMITTEES;id=committees%2Fcommsen%2F1a8fab-c9-b51e-4af4-8f4b-e162505af0d9%2F0000;query=id%3A%22committees%2Fcommsen%2F1a8fab-c9-b51e-4af4-8f4b-e162505af0d9%2F0000%22>