



The Australian Prevention
Partnership Centre
Systems and solutions for better health

A systems approach to lifestyle-related chronic health problems

Australia, like most of the rest of the world, is facing an epidemic in chronic disease. Factors such as smoking, harmful alcohol use, poor nutrition and physical inactivity are causing an epidemic in chronic health problems including cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, cancer and diabetes. These diseases are not only the leading cause of death in this country, they restrict how millions of Australians live every day.

While Australia has made progress in promoting good health – especially our work in tobacco control – we have a long way to go to help all Australians, particularly high-risk and vulnerable groups, reduce their risk of chronic disease.

A lot of work in prevention has targeted individual behaviour, trying to persuade people to eat better, to move more, to not smoke and to drink less alcohol to reduce their risk of illness. But many things affect how we live. Where we work, eat, play and live, and our access to work and education, all affect our health. For example, trying to persuade people to eat more fruit and vegetables won't work as well if they live in remote Australia where fresh food is hard to find and expensive, and how do you stay active if your neighbourhood has few safe places to walk or cycle?

All this means that quick fixes won't work to prevent chronic disease. We need to take a broader and deeper view of the social, economic and environmental factors that are combining to drive the increase in lifestyle-related chronic health problems. Systems thinking is about finding solutions by tackling multiple parts of a problem at once.

The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre

The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre is a national initiative that is identifying new ways of understanding what works and what doesn't to prevent lifestyle-related chronic health problems in Australia and getting results into practice.

We want to provide health decision makers with the best evidence to inform their policies and programs, and to provide the evidence and tools for a comprehensive approach to preventing chronic health problems that includes working in the health system as well as in sectors outside of it, such as in schools, food production and retailing, and urban planning.

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Our objectives

Across the priority areas of obesity, diet, tobacco, physical activity and alcohol, our three core objectives are to:

- Strengthen the research base for prevention
- Synthesise evidence and make readily available what is known
- Help activate an effective and efficient prevention system.

Outcomes

The Centre's work will result in:

- Better understanding of the importance of prevention
- Tools and methods to support a national prevention system, including ways to examine the evidence to inform policy, to identify the gaps in the current system and to determine priorities for change
- Internationally significant research about innovative methods in prevention, systems science and communication of prevention
- New ways for researchers, policy and program practitioners to work together and form strong national networks
- Increased people capacity, with a group of new researchers and policy makers and practitioners who can understand and use health economics, evaluation, systems science and communication to build healthier communities.

Our partners and people

Established in July 2013, the Centre has \$22.6 million in resources over five years that has been provided by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the Australian National Preventive Health Agency, NSW Ministry of Health, ACT Health, the Hospitals Contribution Fund of Australia and the HCF Research Foundation. It is one of two new NHMRC Partnership Centres launched in 2013 to improve the availability and quality of research evidence to policy decision makers.

The Centre is administered by the Sax Institute in Sydney and co-hosted by the Sax Institute and the Centre for Excellence in Intervention and Prevention Science in Melbourne. The Director is Professor Andrew Wilson, who has unparalleled leadership experience in management and transformational change at state government, university and health region levels.

The team includes many of Australia's international lead researchers in prevention, with 31 investigators from five states and territories and more than 20 universities, and government, non-government and private sector agencies. The investigators are champions of developing evidence from research, implementing research-informed changes to policy and practice, and innovative research methods.

How will we work?

A fundamental pillar of our approach is that we will draw evidence equally from research and practice to develop a prevention system. These two sources of innovation – learning from research and learning from doing – will inform and enhance each other to create effective interventions and policies.


We have established four capacity units that will improve the gathering, sharing and use of evidence to build a prevention system in Australia:

Rapid Response Evaluation Capacity: Led by Professor Adrian Bauman at the University of Sydney, this unit will help to embed research and evaluation in the rollout of policies and programs.

Synthesis Capacity: Led by Professor Sally Redman at the Sax Institute, this unit will develop and apply ways to summarise and communicate evidence to address key issues for policy makers and practitioners.

Systems Science and Implementation Capacity: Led by Professor Alan Shiell at the Centre of Excellence in Prevention Science, this unit will help policy makers and practitioners strengthen policies and programs by applying a systems perspective at the design stage and during implementation.

Communication Capacity: Led by Partnership Director Professor Andrew Wilson, this unit will develop methods to better communicate prevention to policy makers, funders, practitioners and the community, and will help develop more sophisticated public discussion on prevention science and public policy.

The Centre's innovative collaborative approach aims to bridge the divide between policy makers and practitioners and researchers. Researchers are working with policy makers and practitioners to develop research questions, conduct research, and analyse, interpret and disseminate the findings. As such, it is the model of interaction that is being tested as much as the specific projects. 

The projects

With our funders, we have plans for more than 30 projects over the five years. Initial projects include:

- Investigating how each aspect of the Australian food supply affects availability, affordability and acceptability of different foods. Led by Professor Sharon Friel, Australian National University
- Developing and validating national liveability indicators associated with chronic disease risk factors and health outcomes. Led by Professor Billie Giles-Corti, University of Melbourne
- Developing methods for the economic evaluation of prevention. Led by Professor Stephen Jan, University of Sydney
- Developing a model for planning and monitoring the prevention workforce with The Australian National Preventive Health Agency. Led by Professor Andrew Wilson, University of Sydney.

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