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NSW Public Health Bulletin **Discussion Paper**

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Part 1

Background and summary of recommendations

1. Background

The *NSW Public Health Bulletin* was established in May 1990 by the then Chief Health Officer, Dr Sue Morey, as part of the newly-developed public health infrastructure in New South Wales. Its purpose is to enable the timely communication of information on public health issues, and thus to contribute to the development of a well-trained and informed public health workforce. It has been in continuous production since 1990 and is published up to 11 times a year. Over the past 10 years the Bulletin has continued to expand both its distribution base and its circulation. Currently over 6,500 printed copies are distributed nationally and internationally to a wide range of public health workers in a variety of settings including: public health units, laboratories, primary care settings and local government authorities. It is also available through the Bulletin's home page within the Department of Health's Web site at www.health.nsw.gov.au/public-health/phb/phb.html.

The Bulletin stays in touch with its audience through its Editorial Advisory Committee and meetings with stakeholders. Such a meeting in 1996 produced a series of recommendations that have supported the directions taken by the Bulletin in recent years. Throughout it has retained its focus to support effective public health action within New South Wales, where its core audience has been the public health workforce within the health service.

This paper is intended to stimulate a broad discussion regarding the future directions of the Bulletin including its audience, content and style. We welcome your comments and a faxback form is provided for your use. This information will shape a survey of the Bulletin's readers, and the final outcome will be recommendations to the Chief Health Officer to support the continuing relevance of the Bulletin.

Comments should be mailed to:

The Editor
NSW Public Health Bulletin
Public Health Division
NSW Department of Health
Locked Mail Bag 961
North Sydney NSW 2059

or faxed to:

(02) 9391 9232.

2. Summary and recommendations

The Bulletin is produced by the Public Health Division of the NSW Department of Health as an information vehicle for the whole public health community in NSW. Its aim is to provide its readers with population health data and peer-reviewed information to support effective public health action.

The following recommendations are suggested to enable the Bulletin retain its relevance to public health practice in NSW.

2.1 Summary of Recommendations

1. That the aims and objectives of the Bulletin are endorsed (3.1).
2. That the Bulletin survey its readers in 2001 (4.2).
3. That the content of the survey be determined by focus groups (4.2).
4. That principal readership groups, and the major areas of content which are relevant to them, be explored through the survey (4.2).
5. That the internet readership be included in the survey (4.2).
6. That the findings of the survey be explored using focus groups (4.2).
7. That the findings of the survey inform a distribution policy for the Public Health Training and Development Unit and the 17 public health units in NSW (5.3).
8. That new types of regular features be investigated (6.1).
9. That special issues and series be continued (6.1).
10. That the content be influenced by the results of the survey (6.1).
11. That the Bulletin remain a peer-reviewed publication (6.3).
12. That updates of the index are published annually (6.6).
13. That the current layout and design be maintained (7.2).
14. That improvements to layout and design be made, if appropriate, after the survey (7.2).
15. That the current length of an issue, 16–24 pages, be maintained (7.4).
16. That the effect of the length of the Bulletin on readers' use be explored in focus groups to follow the survey (7.4).
17. That the readership be encouraged to access the Bulletin through the Web site by making this process easy and attractive (7.6).
18. That links with other Web pages are established (7.6).
19. That the current advertising policy is continued (8.1).
20. That bound volumes of the Bulletin be maintained by the Public Health Division and the Chief Health Officer (9.1).
21. That the Public Health Division maintain the electronic archive (9.1).
22. That membership of the Editorial Advisory Committee and its terms of reference are reviewed on an annual basis (11.2).

Part 2

Readership, content and distribution

3. Aim and objectives

The Bulletin's aim is to publish population health data and peer-reviewed information to support effective public health action in NSW. It does this by achieving the following objectives:

- providing timely information from the surveillance of notifiable conditions in NSW;
- reporting significant national or international trends in communicable disease activity with the potential to affect the population of NSW;
- publishing peer-reviewed articles describing the response of the local public health community to perceived threats to the public's health;
- publishing peer-reviewed articles describing the development, implementation and/or evaluation of health service activities undertaken by the public health community;
- reporting on relevant policy initiatives;
- notifying the release of substantial public health resources: for example, the Report of the Chief Health Officer of NSW;
- showcasing innovative public health work;
- promoting evidence-based public health practice in NSW;
- supporting workforce-development by providing a peer-reviewed forum through which public health workers can publish their work;
- functioning as a link among health service providers, including general practitioners.

Further objectives for the Bulletin include:

- providing the Chief Health Officer with a medium through which to raise issues;
- expanding the health surveillance information reported to include areas such as injury, drug and alcohol use, food safety and environmental health.

3.1 Recommendation

That the aim and objectives of the Bulletin are endorsed.

4. Readership

The Bulletin was initiated in 1990 by the Chief Health Officer to:

- meet the communication needs of the newly formed public health infrastructure of the NSW health system;
- provide regular feedback to practitioners on notifiable conditions, in particular communicable diseases.

Ten years later the public health workforce within the health service of NSW remains the core audience for the Bulletin. However, as the role of public health has expanded so has this audience. Other sectors with a strong public health focus, such as local government authorities, now also regularly receive the Bulletin. A meeting to discuss the future directions of the Bulletin held in 1996 recommended that it should be an information vehicle for the whole public health community in NSW.

The Bulletin is currently distributed to public health workers in organisations such as the Department of Health, area health services, local government and primary health care. These people perform a wide variety of tasks, from the provision of clinical services through to illness prevention and health promotion. Consequently they have differing needs as readers. While there is an interstate and international readership their needs are not the focus of the Bulletin.

A publication requires a clear sense of its readers and their needs in order to develop its content. Therefore the Bulletin will redefine who its readers are and their major areas of interest by conducting a survey in 2001.

Little is known about the readers who access the Bulletin through its homepage within the Department's Web site. While it was originally expected that Web publication would reduce the demand for the printed version, this has not eventuated. It may be that a new readership is being engaged through this medium.

Whether the Bulletin is reaching all potential readers is a separate question. As interest in public health expands, the Bulletin potentially becomes relevant to a wider audience. However, there are increased costs (printing and postage) associated with continuing to expand the readership if new readers are to receive a printed copy.

4.2 Recommendations

That the Bulletin survey its readers in 2001.

That the content of the survey be determined by focus groups.

That principal readership groups, and the major areas of content which are relevant to them, be explored through the survey.

That the internet readership be included in the survey.

That the findings of the survey be explored using focus groups.

5. Distribution

The Bulletin is produced up to 11 times a year in both printed and electronic formats. Currently there is no distribution policy and the distribution list continues to expand with frequent requests for the printed version and increasing use of the Web site.

5.1 Printed distribution

The 6,500 printed copies are distributed from:

- the Public Health Training and Development Unit (755)
- the 17 public health units throughout the state (5,745).

Table 1 describes the number of copies distributed by the above sites. It illustrates that there is wide variation in the number of copies distributed by the public health units: from 100 (Far West) to 800 (Hunter). This reflects the priorities of the different units who determine their own distribution policies and lists. In some areas, the Bulletin is routinely sent to medical practitioners, pharmacists, and hospital staff; in other areas, distribution is limited to those working closely with the public health unit.

A distribution policy is required to advise the directors of public health units on key readership groups. For example, in order to meet the aim and objectives of the Bulletin it has been suggested that all divisions of general practice, hospitals and laboratories should receive copies.

5.2 Electronic distribution

An electronic version of each issue is available on the Bulletin's homepage at www.health.nsw.gov.au/public-health/phb/phb.html. The homepage is popular with readers, and is among the 'top 10' of the Department's Web sites, being regularly visited by 700–800 readers each month. The Bulletin is also available on the Department's intranet site.

5.3 Recommendation

That the findings of the survey inform a distribution policy for the Public Health Training and Development Unit and the 17 public health units in NSW.

Table 1**Distribution of the printed version of the Bulletin each month**

Distribution point	Number of copies
Public Health Training and Development Unit	
Readers within NSW Department of Health	94
Members of the Editorial Advisory Committee	15
Library	22
Reception	50
External Distribution	
Aboriginal organisations	20
Central Clinical School, University of Sydney	30
Interstate readers	240
International readers	70
Local Government Authorities in NSW	179
Miscellaneous centres requiring multiple copies	35
Public Health Units in NSW	
Central Coast	430
Central Sydney	255
Centre for Public Health (Albury)	350
Far West NSW (Broken Hill)	100
Hunter	800
Illawarra	150
Macquarie	225
Mid North Coast	500
Mid Western Area	140
New England	430
Northern Rivers	150
Northern Sydney	250
South Eastern Sydney	400
Southern	300
South Western Sydney	265
Wentworth	250
Western Sydney	450
St George Hospital, for staff	300
Total distribution list	6,500

6. Content

The content of the Bulletin reflects its purpose to support the work of the public health workforce in NSW and can be broadly divided into four categories.

Information to inform immediate action

- the Communicable Diseases Report provides a monthly interpretation of the reports of notifiable conditions, principally communicable diseases, within the 17 area health services. It also contains reports of surveillance activity by the state's 17 public health units. The report is coordinated by the medical epidemiologist who manages the Department's Communicable Disease Surveillance and Control Unit. It allows practitioners such as doctors and laboratory workers to know 'what is going on' within their own area and compare this with activity for NSW. Significant national or international trends in communicable disease activity that have the potential to affect the population of NSW are also included;
- descriptions of policy that are relevant to the public health community;
- notification of the release of substantial resources such as the Report of the Chief Health Officer.

Information describing the work of the public health community

Submitted peer-reviewed articles describing the development, implementation and/or evaluation of the health services undertaken by the public health community, and their response to perceived threats to the public health. Examples include the description of investigations of outbreaks of communicable disease, and the evaluation of service interventions such as health promotion activities. Letters to the editor in response to these papers are also published.

Special features

In recent years Bulletin has been exploring some topics in greater depth than is possible through an occasional article or report. Series of articles (for example, on suicide), and issues (for example, on child health, injury, oral health and women's health) have described the current activity within the state to address particular public health problems. Authors are usually invited to contribute to these special features and the peer-review process is maintained by guest editors who are leading public health professionals in the field. These issues have proved popular with the readership and allow the Bulletin to focus on areas of interest rather than be driven solely by unsolicited articles submitted for publication.

Features that support the functions of the Bulletin

An annual subject-author index, a brief guide to authors wishing to publish in the Bulletin, and a new subscribers/change of address form are published.

Like any serial publication, to remain vital and engaging for its readers and to attract new readers, the Bulletin needs a mixture of regular features and special material.

Currently, the Communicable Diseases Report, *FactSheet* and *EpiReview* provide regular content each month. Their standard layout and placement at the end of each issue maximises their accessibility to readers. Other regular features could be developed. Examples include:

- expanding the health surveillance information reported to include areas such as injury, drug and alcohol use and the environment;
- providing annual reports on food safety in NSW.

6.1 Recommendations

That new types of regular features be investigated.

That special issues and series be continued.

That the content be influenced by the results of the survey.

6.2 Peer review

The Bulletin uses peer review to maintain standards and to ensure relevance. Articles must provide new information and be scientifically rigorous. Not all material submitted to the Bulletin is accepted. Authors of highly clinical papers are advised to submit their articles to other journals.

Submitted and invited papers are reviewed by one expert in the subject. Most reviewers are staff of NSW Health. Each reviewer is provided with standard guidelines to guide their evaluation. Reviewers are advised on the outcome of the submitted article.

Most published articles require revisions by the author(s).

6.3 Recommendation

That the Bulletin remain a peer-reviewed publication

6.4 Approval of content

The Bulletin, as a publication of the NSW Department of Health, requires prior approval to publish its content. It is cleared for publication each month sequentially through Health Public Affairs, the Chief Health Officer and the Director-General. A printed copy is sent to the office of the Minister for Health for information.

6.5 Index

A comprehensive subject and author index, covering the Bulletin's content from the first issue in May 1990 until the end of 1997, was published as the January–February 1998 issue. This issue was also published electronically on the Web site as a PDF file (which required an Acrobat reader to view and download). Until then there had been no ready way for readers to identify relevant subjects in past issues. Since the index was produced there has been a large number of requests for back issues, indicating that the index is a facility that readers use.

The last issue for each year will contain a subject and author index for that calendar year. An updated index for the whole period of publication is available on the Department's Web site. The Bulletin's index is now posted as an HTML (hypertext mark up language) file allowing the subject and author content of the Bulletin to be searched on the Web.

Suggestions for improving the index are welcome.

6.6 Recommendation

That updates of the index are published annually.

7. Bulletin format

7.1 Layout and design

The design of a publication influences the way it is read. Good design allows the page to be read and understood quickly. The aim should be to save the reader time, misunderstanding and effort by presenting the material in a layout that is clear and concise, without distractions.

Until the April 1998 issue, the design of the Bulletin had remained unchanged since 1990. It is produced in two colours, a very dark green for the text and some feature bars and lines, and a lighter green used as a background screen colour for tables, figures and text boxes.

While this familiar format was liked by readers, the production team were aware of some criticism, in particular that:

- the text typeface was small
- there were many styles of type
- there were many design elements
- the front page looked crowded
- some lines of text were very long, making them difficult to read.

In response, the following minor changes were introduced in April 1998 following consultation with the Editorial Advisory Committee:

- non-essential design elements have been eliminated (while the established look of the page has been maintained)
- the text typeface has been enlarged to 10 points
- the presentation of the front page has been simplified
- the number of typefaces has been reduced
- tables and graphs have been simplified.

7.2 Recommendations

That the current layout and design be maintained.

That improvements to layout and design be made, if appropriate, after the survey.

7.3 Length of issues

The size of the Bulletin has increased gradually since 1990, when issues had an average of 10 pages (the first issue was six pages). In recent years, issues have been longer, with an average length of between 16 and 24 pages.

The length of a publication is an important aspect of its style, and affects readers' use and how much time they devote to it. Like consistency in layout, consistency in length can make a publication more accessible to readers. There are also increasing production costs associated with an expanding size.

The Bulletin's current objective is to produce a 16–24 page issue each month.

7.4 Recommendations

That the current length of an issue, 16–24 pages, be maintained.

That the effect of the length of the Bulletin on readers' use be explored in focus groups to follow the survey.

7.5 Electronic version

Currently, the electronic version of the Bulletin is a facsimile of the printed version produced in PDF format and loaded onto the Bulletin's homepage within the NSW Department of Health's Web site. Readers are alerted to the electronic Bulletin's arrival by an announcement on the Department's internet mailing list. To access the Bulletin the user needs an Acrobat reader to read PDF files. This reader is freely available from the Department's Web site, is easy to download, and needs to be downloaded only once. Most Departmental publications are accessed electronically in Acrobat format.

To encourage Bulletin readers to use the electronic version the homepage has easily accessible links that:

- provide a brief background to the Bulletin;
- show how to subscribe to the Department's internet mailing list;
- describe the Bulletin's subject and author index and how to access them;
- automatically download the Acrobat reader;
- access the latest issue;
- access back issues since May 1990;
- provide information for authors on how to prepare manuscripts;
- describe how to contact the editorial and production staff.

The Bulletin recognises the increasing importance of internet access to publications and will investigate how to establish links with other Web pages, such as journal listings and health and government sites.

7.6 Recommendations

That the readership be encouraged to access the Bulletin through the Web site by making this process easy and attractive.

That links with other Web pages are established.

8. Advertising policy

The Bulletin does not accept paid advertising. Notices of meetings organised by NSW Health for the public health workforce are occasionally inserted. Similarly, loose insertions describing new publications by the Department (for example, the Chief Health Officer's report) and bulletins on information relevant to the public health community produced by other organisations (for example, Cancer Council updates) are also included. These organisations pay for the cost of insertion.

8.1 Recommendation

That the current advertising policy is continued.

9. Archiving

Printed copy

There are currently three bound sets of the Bulletin; one is held by the John Tutt Library at the NSW Department of Health, a second by the Public Health Training and Development Unit, and a third by the Chief Health Officer.

Libraries around the country, including four legal deposit libraries, also maintain copies of the Bulletin.

Electronic copy

Since 1999, all current and past issues of the Bulletin have been made available on the Bulletin's home page within the Department's Web site. Each new issue of the Bulletin is posted on the homepage at the same time that the issue is sent to the printers. This means that the electronic copy can be accessed up to two weeks before the printed copy.

9.1 Recommendations

That bound volumes of the Bulletin be maintained by the Public Health Division and the Chief Health Officer.

That the Public Health Division maintain the electronic archive.

10. Storage of back issues

There is a small but constant demand for back issues of the Bulletin. This need has been met by maintaining a store of old copies, which requires considerable space and maintenance. Providing this has always been troublesome.

The Better Health Centre stored and distributed the back issues until 1999. However, the Public Health Training and Development Unit now manages this.

Most requests for back copies are directed to the Unit, and the Better Health Centre had difficulty in maintaining the copies in a readily accessible form.

In 1998 the complete store of back issues was reviewed. A policy was developed to keep 30 copies of each issue, where possible, for issues up to the two most recent years. For these years, 50 copies of each issue will be held. All copies are now held by the Public Health Training and Development Unit.

11. Editorial Advisory Committee

An Editorial Advisory Committee was established with the inception of the Bulletin but had ceased to be active by 1995. Consequently, in 1996 the role of the committee was reviewed and a new committee formed with redrafted terms of reference.

The purpose of the Editorial Advisory Committee is to advise the Chief Health Officer on editorial policy for the *NSW Public Health Bulletin*. The committee is expected to assist the editor to ensure that the Bulletin remains relevant and accessible to a broad range of people working in public health in NSW.

11.1 Terms of reference

The Committee:

- advises on the content of the Bulletin;
- advises on future directions for the Bulletin;
- comments on proposed changes to layout and style;
- ensures that the Bulletin meets the purposes of NSW Health publications as described in the NSW Health Publications Policy Framework.

The Committee reports to the Chief Health Officer through the editor. Its advice is in the form of recommendations. The Committee does not have executive powers or responsibilities, and the adoption of its recommendations is at the discretion of the Chief Health Officer.

Members are appointed at the invitation of the Chief Health Officer. They bring experience and expertise in one or more of the following fields of public health and writing, as well as representing the public health workforce in NSW. Members are:

- the editor of the Bulletin (as chair);
- the managing editor (as secretary);
- the manager of the Communicable Diseases Surveillance and Control Unit of the NSW Department of Health;
- two representatives of the public health units;
- one representative from each of the Centres of the Public Health Division of the NSW Department of Health;
- one representative from the Policy Development Division of the NSW Department of Health;
- one representative from the Epidemiology and Surveillance Branch of the NSW Department of Health;

- one representative from the Mental Health Branch of the NSW Department of Health;
- an expert in health promotion;
- an expert in food surveillance;
- an expert in environmental health;
- an expert in journalism.

Individual members may represent more than one field of expertise, perspective or part of the organisation of NSW Health. Members are usually appointed for periods of one to two years. Membership may not be extended beyond a two-year term, but members may be reappointed in the future.

The committee ordinarily meets three times a year.

The current membership of the committee is:

Lynne Madden, Public Health Training and Development Unit

Michael Giffin, NSW Public Health Bulletin

Jeremy McAnulty, Communicable Diseases Surveillance and Control Unit

Anthony Capon, Western Sector Public Health Unit

Victor Carey, Central Sydney Public Health Unit

Steevie Chan, Policy Division

Liz Murphy, Policy Division

Bill Bellew, Health Promotion Branch

Louisa Jorm, Epidemiology and Surveillance Branch

Gavin Stewart, Mental Health Branch

Ed Kraa, Food Safety Unit

Neil Shaw, Environmental Health Branch

Rosemary Aldrich, Newcastle Institute for Public Health

Siun Gallagher, Westmead Hospital Dental School.

11.2 Recommendation

That membership of the Editorial Advisory Committee and its terms of reference are reviewed on an annual basis.

NSW PUBLIC HEALTH BULLETIN

The *NSW Public Health Bulletin* is a publication of the NSW Department of Health. The editor is Dr Lynne Madden, Manager, Public Health Training and Development Unit.

Dr Michael Giffin is the managing editor.

The *Bulletin* aims to provide its readers with population health data and information to support effective public health action.

Submission of articles

Articles, news and comments should be 1000 words or less in length and include a summary of the key points to be made in the first paragraph. References should be set out in the Vancouver style, described in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, 1997; 336: 309–315. Send submitted articles on paper and in electronic form, either on disc (Word for Windows is preferred), or by email. The article must be accompanied by a letter signed by all authors. Full instructions for authors are available on request from the editor.

Editorial correspondence

Please address all correspondence and potential contributions to The Editor, *NSW Public Health Bulletin*, Locked Mail Bag 961, North Sydney NSW 2059 or to phbulletin@doh.health.nsw.gov.au. Tel 61 2 9391 9241, Fax 61 2 9391 9232.

Distribution

Please contact your local Public Health Unit or telephone 61 2 9391 9942 to obtain copies of the *NSW Public Health Bulletin* or to notify us of a change of address. The *Bulletin* can be accessed via the Internet from the Department's Web site at: www.health.nsw.gov.au/public-health/phb/phb.html.

Back issues can be obtained from the Public Health Training and Development Unit, Locked Mail Bag 961, North Sydney NSW 2059.