NATIONAL PRIMARY HEALTH CARE POLICY FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

Introduction
This paper sets out a definition of Primary Health Care (PHC), put forward by General Practice and Primary Health Care Northern Territory (GPPHCNT) for consideration in the national policy debate. GPPHCNT is the peak body representing the Territory’s general practice and primary health care sector. We work to improve the health of Territorians by:
- providing a range of recruitment and retention services to GPs, GP employers and health services
- representing, coordinating and supporting the work of the two NT Divisions of General Practice
- leading primary health care advocacy and policy development, collaboration, integration and partnerships to improve health outcomes.

Background
Several health organisations, including the Australian Divisions of General Practice (ADGP) are advocating with the Australian Government for the development of a national Primary Health Care (PHC) policy, which would promote inter-sectoral integration and provide a holistic framework for policy and program development, and service delivery. This would provide an alternative to the current approach of pursuing fragmented ad hoc initiatives, pilots and programs. The need for a national PHC policy has been identified by the Phillips’ Review of the Role of Divisions of General Practice and the National Vision for Divisions Summit of August 2003. Aspects of the policy framework would include:
- establishment of an overall vision and a set of strategic objectives
- defining how General Practice fits into PHC
- defining the relationship with other professional groups
- defining the role of the Divisions network within the broader PHC system
- establishment of systemic collaboration and partnership with the secondary and tertiary sectors.

The need for a comprehensive definition of primary health care
As the starting point for developing a national policy, GPPHCNT advocates the adoption of a comprehensive definition of Primary Health Care. Such a definition will provide the basis for the development of a national policy framework for PHC which will take into account the principles of PHC as espoused by the WHO (and supported by general practice and primary health care services, communities and consumers in the NT).

A comprehensive definition of Primary Health Care will:
- inform and define the scope of the national PHC policy debate
- establish a foundation and shared understanding for development of a national PHC policy framework
- ensure inclusiveness of Divisions and General Practitioners.
GPPHCNT Definition of Primary Health Care

The way PHC is conceptualised should be broad and should be informed by developments in international PHC policy, which highlight the continuing validity and application of the PHC approach. Drawing upon World Health Organisation sources, the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute (APHCRI) has developed a working definition of what PHC involves. GPPHCNT proposes a number of amendments to this definition (these amendments are in italics, with a note provided to justify each proposed amendment) to fully capture the meaning of PHC:

- Primary Health Care is socially and culturally appropriate, universally accessible, scientifically sound first level care provided by health services and systems with a suitably trained multidisciplinary workforce supported by integrated referral systems and in a way that gives priority to those most need and addresses health inequalities, maximises community and individual self-reliance, participation and control, and involves collaboration and partnership with other sectors to promote public health. It includes the following:
  - health promotion
  - illness prevention
  - treatment and care of the sick
  - community development
  - advocacy
  - rehabilitation

1) It is important to note that, because the provision of primary level clinical care is fundamental to the delivery of PHC, and primary care is delivered by services, PHC is delivered through service organisations which operate within systems.

2) This amendment recognises that holistic PHC is delivered by a number of health professionals trained in various fields, as well as by multidisciplinary teams of PHC practitioners often based within the same PHC service.

3) As propagated by the Declaration of Alma Ata and highlighted again more recently by the Jakarta Declaration, the PHC approach is not merely concerned with prioritising care for those most in need. It focuses on the systemic achievement of equity in health “to increase health expectancy, and to narrow the gap in health expectancy between countries and groups.”

4) A key difference between the delivery of PHC and primary care is that PHC involves real and significant consumer and community participation in the governance of PHC services, and a focus on population health. PHC is about individual and community empowerment; not only patient-centered but patient-driven.

5) The concept of partnership better highlights the need for greater integration at the national level between the primary, secondary, acute and tertiary sectors.

6) Public health promotion is a major function of PHC, as described by the Ottawa Charter, and should be explicitly mentioned in its definition.
7) Forming a crucial part of PHC, primary clinical care specifically involves treatment of the sick, and is one of the four key planks of PHC service delivery defined by the Alma Ata Declaration (promotive, preventative, curative and rehabilitative).

8) A large volume of research points to socio-economic status as the most significant determinant of the health status of individuals. Addressing the socio-economic determinants of health is thus inherent in the PHC approach. It “involves, in addition to the health sector, all related sectors and aspects of national and community development, in particular agriculture, animal husbandry, food, industry, education, housing, public works, communications and other sectors; and demands the coordinated efforts of all those sectors”.

9) The rehabilitative function of PHC is one of the four planks of the Alma Ata Declaration on PHC.

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1 World Health Organisation (2003), Primary Health Care: A Framework for Future Strategic Directions, WHO
3 WHO (1978), Declaration of Alma Ata, WHO
5 WHO (1986), Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, WHO
9 Declaration of Alma Ata, op. cit.