

30 May 2008



Dr Christine Bennett
Chair
National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission
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By e-mail: talkhealth@nhhrc.org.au

Dear Dr Bennett

Response to Draft Principles for Australia's Health System

The Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) is an independent, non-profit law and policy organisation that identifies public interest issues and works co-operatively with other organisations to advocate for individuals and groups affected. PIAC seeks to promote a just and democratic society by making strategic interventions on public interest issues, including health consumer issues.

PIAC welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Draft Principles for Australia's Health System as part of the current development work being undertaken by the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission (the Commission).

PIAC supports the following principles without further comment: 5 Comprehensive; 11 Transparency and accountability; 12 Public Voice; 14 Responsible spending on health; and 15 A culture of reflective improvement and innovation.

PIAC supports the adoption of the remaining principles and provides the following further comment.

1. People and family centred

An important aspect of this principle is the protection of health information that is personal to the individual. The focus of any health service delivery should include consideration of how the privacy of the individual can be best protected while delivering the most effective health care services.

2. Equity

In addition to the characteristics listed as dimensions of inequality, it is important to include the particular dimensions of gender and disability. Both can have key impacts on the way in which services are delivered and received and should be expressly included in the listed dimensions.

An aspect of equity that is often overlooked is equity of access to the benefits of emerging technologies. Often such technologies are made available on a basis that is limited either by location or capacity to pay. It is vital that this principle reflects that equity should be achieved in terms of access to such technologies.

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3. Shared responsibility

PIAC acknowledges the importance of shared responsibility as a principle, and supports the view that 'the health system can only work effectively if everyone participates according to these shared responsibilities'. However, it is important to acknowledge the differing capacities of consumers/patients to participate and fulfil their responsibility. Such capacity can vary due to factors personal to the individual or to changing circumstances affecting the person in their life at any particular time. This principle would be more appropriate if it included the concept of participation to the best of a person's ability in the circumstances.

Further, it is important to ensure that the principle includes respect for the individual's right to self-determination. To this end, PIAC urges the Commission to include the development and adoption of a Charter of Health Consumer Rights that include shared responsibility and respect for self-determination within the rights.

4. Strengthening prevention and wellness

While this is an important principle, it is important to reflect within it on the need for whole-of-government co-operation on prevention and wellness. All government actions should be tested against health impacts, both short and long term. Responsibility for prevention and wellness cannot rest solely with government health departments. Other departments need to be held responsible for ensuring their programs and activities are consistent with promotion of health and wellness and prevention of illness, disease and injury.

6. Value for money

A key concern in this area is the government subsidy effectively provided to private health insurers (for-profit organisations) through the federal private health insurance rebate. Priority should not be given to providing financial incentives that enable choice of health provider over meeting the basic health needs of the whole community.

7. Providing for future generations

A key element of ensuring future generations have access to quality health care is to ensure that the role of health professionals and allied health professionals is properly valued. We remain in a situation where there is insufficient support for nurses and other health professionals in our public health system for them to be retained. This situation must be reversed and the valuing of these key personnel needs to be reflected in the principle.

8. Recognise broader environmental influences shape our health

As noted above, in response to Principle 4, it is vital that Australia has a whole-of-government approach on this issue and requires health impacts to be a core consideration in the development and implementation of government policy and programs.

9. Taking the long-term view

A key aspect of this principle should be understanding and acting on key health impacts such as poverty and other forms of disadvantage. While it is not the responsibility of the health system to deal directly with all of the various influences on health, it is necessary to understand those impacts in order to effectively determine priority for health program and services delivery.

10. Safety and quality

This is a vitally important principle and one that needs to be reflected in all aspects of health service development and delivery. We need, as a country, to move from closed responses to adverse and critical incidents to systems that seek to understand the factors that led to such incidents and how we can prevent them recurring. Openness and transparency are vital elements of this approach.

As with issues of shared responsibility and self-determination, PIAC considers that a Charter of Health Consumers Rights should include rights relating to safety and quality, and transparency of reporting of incidents and responding to complaints or concerns.

13. A respectful, ethical system

A core element to a respectful and ethical system is a framework of rights and expectations that is understood and upheld by all participants. A Charter of Health Consumers Rights is an appropriate framework in this regard.

As noted above in response to several of the principles, PIAC believes that a core document necessary for the delivery and development of effective health and hospital services consistent with the draft principles is a Charter of Health Consumer Rights. PIAC has done extensive work on such a Charter in the past and would be happy to provide further information to the Commission to guide its work in this regard.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robin Banks', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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Chief Executive Officer

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