
AMA submission to Senate Standing Committee on Economics - inquiry into personal choice and community impacts

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The AMA is pleased to provide a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Economics Inquiry into personal choice and community impacts to highlight the important role of public health measures which can be viewed by some as impacting on personal choice. While the Inquiry has a specific focus, consideration of other public health measures like immunisation, food safety and road safety would enhance the understanding of how public health measures work to improve the health of the community. As recently as 50 years ago, infections like polio (poliomyelitis) were encountered in epidemic proportions in Australia. For many, this resulted in permanent disability through paralysis and even death. Due to mass immunisation in the 1950s and 1960s the last case of wild polio was reported in Australia 1972.

This submission explains why public health is important and why Governments have a role in public health measures and why some public health measures need to be implemented in ways that appear to restrict personal choice.

Public health

Public health is the organised response by society to minimise death, illness, injury and disability, and to protect and promote health of the whole community. Public health initiatives include efforts to promote free and open information to facilitate informed decision making, protect individuals from being harmed by other individuals and groups, and facilitates societal action to promote and protect health.ⁱ

According to the World Health Organisation improvements in public health are achieved by providing conditions in which people can be healthy, with a focus on entire populations, rather than individuals.ⁱⁱ Essentially, making the healthy choices the easiest choices for as many people as possible. Millions of people are alive today thanks to a handful of public health initiatives, such as vaccination programs, motor vehicle safety laws, restrictions on the use of tobacco, and clean air and water standards.

A public health approach recognises that many health problems occur because of poor or impaired decision making by individuals. From a psychological perspective the (over) consumption of substances which are known to be harmful (drugs, tobacco, alcohol, salt and sugar) is driven by the brain's reward system. A similar biological mechanism is responsible for engaging in behaviours (without substance) that are known to be dangerous or risky. People tend to underestimate the implications of their behaviour.

As doctors we see the impact of poor decision making by individuals, every day. We treat people whose lives have been changed by preventable illness or trauma. When we step back from treating individuals we see the widespread impact on families and the broader community. We recognise that Governments are uniquely placed in their ability to influence and regulate people's behaviour on a much larger scale than we can as individual doctors. That's part of the reason why doctors and organisation representing the interests of doctors, such as the AMA, engage with Governments around public health issues. We describe our experiences, summarise growing evidence and advocate for areas that require attention on a larger scale.

The Role of Government in public health

The protection of the health and safety of the community is a core function of government. More specifically Governments are responsible for:

- Providing information that empowers people to make informed choices and reduces the likelihood that misinformation will endanger health
- Protect individuals from preventable harm caused by other individuals or groups
- Protect and promote health through population wide initiatives
- Regulate the behaviour of individuals in such a way as to improve their health not only for themselves but for the greater community good.

Regulations typically constrain behaviour, and deliver protection from harms, through obligations that are often backed up by coercive powers.ⁱⁱⁱ Some argue that such regulations are restrictive, over protective and amount to a 'nanny state', but this view fails to appreciate the flow on benefits to society in terms of risk reduction, harm reduction and the mitigation of danger. History also suggests that perception of public health measures and regulations change over time, initially they may be seen as inappropriately intrusive, but over time society grows to accept and even expect such Government protection.^{iv}

Even with such measures in place, people in Australia are largely able to do as they wish, even when it is likely to cause harm to themselves or others. For example, some people continue to smoke or consume excessive amounts of alcohol, arguing that they are only harming themselves. Unfortunately, people rarely factor in the consequences of their behaviour (on themselves and on others) and all too often it is family members and Governments who are left to provide support and care for poor individual decision making. More tragically, sometimes innocent victims have to bear the consequences of poor decision making. As doctors we see too many innocent victims, victims of road traffic accidents caused by drunk or speeding drivers, victims of alcohol and drug induced violence. One night shift for an emergency physician provides enough insight to appreciate why society relies on our regulators to consider and implement measures that aim to protect all of us. Our society doesn't make individuals wholly responsible for the risks and consequences of their actions, nor does the AMA think it should. A sophisticated modern society provides protection for all.

Public health measures sometimes impact on industry and business. Public health measures may seek to inform people about the impacts of using or consuming certain products. Measures may extend to restricting the advertising, increasing price, and reducing access to products known to have a negative impact on health. While business and commercial interests are important considerations, the full extent of harms caused by such products is not borne by that industry or producer, more often the burden is carried by others (by the health care system, law enforcement etc). It is the role of Government to reconcile commercial interest with potential public health

gains and we acknowledge that this is not always easy to balance and is impossible when government has accepted political donations from industry. Nevertheless it is inherently important that this balance is achieved (to ensure a productive and healthy population).

The AMA also suggests that the Committee consider the contemporary issue of increasing rates of obesity. In 1989, 44 per cent of adults in Australia were overweight or obese. Today this number has increased to 63 percent.^v Successive Governments have introduced measures to inform the public about the importance of healthier lifestyles and food choices, including updated National Dietary Guidelines, updated National Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines and introduction of Front of Pack food labelling for packaged foods. If people continue to make poor choices and the number of adults who are overweight or obese continues to increase, Government will have little choice but to regulate.

The benefits of public health action can be measured in economic, health care and productivity gains, as well as through the intrinsic gains of longer healthier lives for citizens. When the full impact of public health measures are accurately calculated they are found to be highly cost effective.^{vi} In the current climate of ever increasing pressure on health financing systems, action in public health is morally and economically imperative.

The Inquiry appears to prioritise personal liberty over the many established benefits of public health measures.

Tobacco smoking

Tobacco smoking continues to be one of the largest preventable causes of death and disease in Australia. Tobacco smoking is related to a broad range of serious and life shortening health conditions. Research estimates that two in three lifetime smokers will die from disease caused by their smoking. A report published in 2008 estimated that tobacco smoking cost Australia \$31.5 billion in social (including health) and economic costs.^{vii}

Recognising this, governments in Australia have introduced a range of public health measures that seek to reduce the number of current smokers, to prevent the uptake of smoking and reduce exposure to second hand smoke to non-smokers. Restrictions are in place that seek to prevent the promotion and advertising of these products, how they are sold and where they can be consumed. The Australian community accepts these measures and with the introduction of plain tobacco packaging Australia is now a world leader in tobacco control.

The measures work. The 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey confirms decreases in tobacco consumption from 24.3 % in 1991, down to 12.8% in 2013. While smokers may argue that current regulations make it increasingly inconvenient and more expensive to consume tobacco products, the Australian community expects this protection. Any suggestion that tobacco control measures be rolled back, would be completely inconsistent with a public health approach, as well as with community expectations. The AMA believes the Australian Governments should continue to canvass and introduce measures that seek to reduce tobacco smoking, and that these measures should extend to newer products such as e-cigarettes.

Alcohol

Unlike tobacco, consumption of alcohol is not inherently harmful. Unfortunately, the reality is that more than half of Australian drinkers consuming alcohol in excess of the recommended

intake (2 standard drinks), and one in five Australians drink alcohol at a level that puts them at increased risk of lifetime harm for injury or disease. The view of the AMA, and shared by many other is that it is now imperative for Government to act. The health, social, and economic burden created by alcohol in Australia is substantial and unacceptable (FARE suggest the cost of alcohol is \$36 billion, with \$2.2 billion used specifically on health care provision). Our emergency departments are overburdened with people experiencing alcohol related harm.

Some State and Local Governments have introduced measures that seek to reduce alcohol related harm in the community. These moves are certainly welcome, but there is much more to be done. The AMA has been advocating for coordinated national action, via a National Alcohol Strategy for some time. The Strategy should ensure that all Australians are sufficiently protected from the harmful effects of alcohol. It is time for the Government to take a leadership role in changing Australia's drinking culture and introducing measures that reduce excessive alcohol consumption.

Cycling helmets

Australia was the first country to make wearing bicycle helmets mandatory. The AMA's support for bicycle helmets dates back even further (1983). Bicycling helmet legislation was introduced by State Governments in Australia between 1990 and 1992. While some States observed an immediate decrease in the number of cyclists, in a short time the number of cyclists quickly returned to pre legislation numbers. You only need to speak to one emergency physician or neurosurgeon who has been able to save a teenagers life because of the protective effect of a bike helmet to understand what a difference it can make.

Today, increasing numbers of Australians are cycling, for recreation and also for active transport. We must seek to ensure cyclists' safety. Strong credible evidence supports Australia's stance on bicycle helmets. Australian research confirms that in accidents with motor vehicles, bike helmets use was associated with a reduced risk of head injury of up to 74%.^{viii} A review commissioned by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau in 2000 also found evidence that bicycle helmets prevent serious injury and even death.^{ix} This is another area where any moves to repeal what is effective would be counter to reason, and inconsistent with community expectations.

Doctors see the impact of tragedy every day. It is why we are unashamed champions for public health. Every day, we see people whose lives have been changed by preventable illness or by trauma. Sometimes the fault is their own, sometimes the fault is with others, but either way the harm is done. All of them say they wish there had been a different outcome.

Government does have a role to play in making this country a safer and healthier society. It does have a role in regulating and modifying the behaviour of individuals so that the rest of us can be confident that we won't be affected by the poor decisions of others such as being run off the road by a drunk driver. Importantly, we need all those who have a responsibility for prevention, including governments at all levels, to live up to their responsibilities for public health and prevention.

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^{iv} Frieden TR. (2013). Government's Role in Protecting Health and Safety. *NEJM*, 368:1857-1850.

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