



VicHealth Health Equity Strategy

2017-19



Introduction: the importance of health equity

This document outlines VicHealth’s approach to promoting health equity in Victoria for the years 2017 to 2019. We hope that other organisations will be encouraged to work and learn with us, potentially adopting similar approaches to ensure social and health equity are considered when developing action to improve the health and wellbeing of all Victorians.

VicHealth’s ambition is for one million more Victorians to have better health and wellbeing by 2023. At the heart of this endeavour is an equitable Victoria, where all people have the opportunity for a healthy life. The VicHealth Action Agenda for Health Promotion recognises the importance of health equity, and of making the greatest health promotion efforts where the greatest health gains are likely.

Achieving health equity means recognising that not everyone enjoys the same opportunities to lead a healthy life, and taking steps to correct this. In Victoria, inequities in health are associated with markers of social position such as education, occupation, income, race/ethnicity, gender, Aboriginality, disability and sexuality. These inequities are apparent across all five of VicHealth’s strategic imperatives: healthy eating, physical activity, mental wellbeing, tobacco use, and harm from alcohol. Where lower social position is associated with worse health, this is known as a social gradient in health.

Health inequities are avoidable. They not only undermine the health of individuals, but impose economic and social costs on the wider community. If health equity is not actively sought in health promotion action, existing inequities are likely to be reinforced. These considerations underscore the importance of promoting health equity for VicHealth.

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Figure 1: the *Fair Foundations* framework

VicHealth’s approach to health equity

To guide our work in health equity, VicHealth developed *Fair Foundations: the VicHealth framework for health equity* (Figure 1), which depicts the determinants of health inequities as different layers of influence (individual; daily living conditions; and socioeconomic, cultural and political context) and points to entry points for health promoting action.

Fair Foundations emphasises that the health of individual Victorians is shaped by the conditions in which they are born, live and work. Differences in access to, or quality of, the conditions needed for a good and healthy life lead to health inequities. For VicHealth, this has several implications.

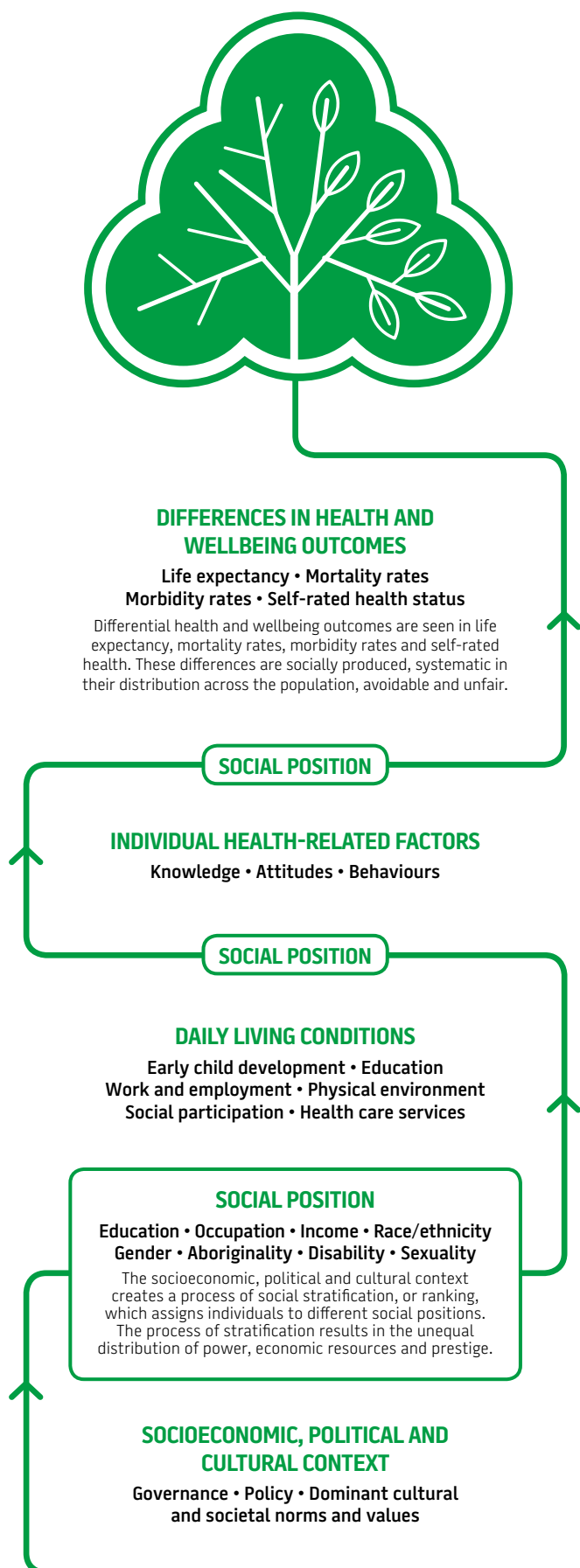
First, promoting health equity doesn’t only mean targeting populations who experience poorer health. It means understanding how the social conditions that influence levels of health and illness – such as education, housing, employment, the physical environment, broader social policy, cultural norms and the political environment – are experienced differently by different groups in the population. And, most importantly, it means tailoring health promotion actions to change those conditions for more equitable outcomes.

Second, to reduce health inequities, the community must take action at all layers of *Fair Foundations*. Health promotion work that changes individual people’s knowledge, attitudes and behaviours is important, but must be combined with work that makes change at the deeper layers of *Fair Foundations*. Efforts directed at the base layer of the framework (socioeconomic, cultural and political context) are more likely to bring the greatest and most sustainable improvements in social equity and, in turn, health equity – but may also take more time to have any effect.

Third, no organisation can tackle health inequities alone. We all need to work with a wide range of organisations – particularly those outside the health sector, local communities, and governments – to ensure that all Victorians have access to the resources and opportunities that will enable them to live healthier lives.

While the harms caused by disadvantage and marginalisation can be dire, VicHealth values and builds upon the strengths inherent in those communities that may be experiencing social and health inequity. VicHealth also recognises everybody’s experience is different, particularly as an individual can belong to a number of the different population groups used to describe health inequities. It is therefore important not to generalise about the experiences of individuals or particular communities.

A core part of VicHealth’s approach to equity is the meaningful involvement of affected communities. Working in true collaboration with affected groups enables their voices to be heard, to help shape planning and decision-making for health promotion, ensuring that health promotion action is guided by lived experience and is owned by those affected.



Fair Foundations: The VicHealth framework for health equity

The social determinants of health inequities: the layers of influence and entry points for action

VicHealth Health Equity Strategy 2017–19

The VicHealth Health Equity Strategy aims to ensure that all Victorians have the means to lead a healthy life. The three focus areas of our strategy reflect current evidence regarding effective organisational approaches to integrating and sustaining a focus on health equity.

1

Put equity in everything

In all of VicHealth's areas of activity, differences in health status are influenced by the social position of groups and individuals. Whether we're aiming to promote healthy eating or physical activity, prevent tobacco use or harm from alcohol, or improve mental wellbeing, there is a clear social gradient.

To improve health in these areas and to ensure our work does not have the unintended consequence of making the existing social gradient steeper, all of our work needs to adopt a focus on health equity. This will ensure that we deliver benefits to the Victorian population in an equitable way. This approach will also enable VicHealth to generate the lessons and evidence needed for us to support the broader health promotion sector to include health equity in all its activities.

To do this, VicHealth will:

- ensure health equity promotion is deliberate, explicit and routine in all its interventions
- increase collaboration with, and empowerment of, affected communities
- encourage and document efforts and successes in improving health equity, through our organisational performance monitoring.

2

Strengthen the capacity of the health promotion sector

VicHealth has an important role to play in working with and supporting the health promotion community to make health equity part of all its efforts. Sharing evidence about factors influencing health equity, and the insights and lessons from our own work and the work of others, will expand everyone's understanding of how to correct health inequities.

To do this, VicHealth will:

- engage, support and work with the Victorian health promotion sector to promote health equity
- provide increased access to evidence-based training, tools and information resources to guide health equity promotion.

3

Influence social equity to improve health equity

Health equity mirrors social equity. It is therefore vital that we identify mutually beneficial ways to collaborate with policymakers and others who work to influence the social conditions that promote good health. The social services sector has worked tirelessly to improve social conditions for all Victorians. We can learn from, work with and support efforts made by the Victorian Government and by social services organisations to improve social equity, in order to improve health equity.

To do this, VicHealth will:

- increase our visibility, voice and influence on social equity issues relevant to public health
- form partnerships and coalitions to advance social and health equity.

Put equity in everything we do at VicHealth

Strengthen the health equity capacity of the health promotion sector

Work with others to influence social equity issues relevant to health



Working simultaneously, we will influence **our own organisation**, the **health promotion sector** and the **broader social sectors**.

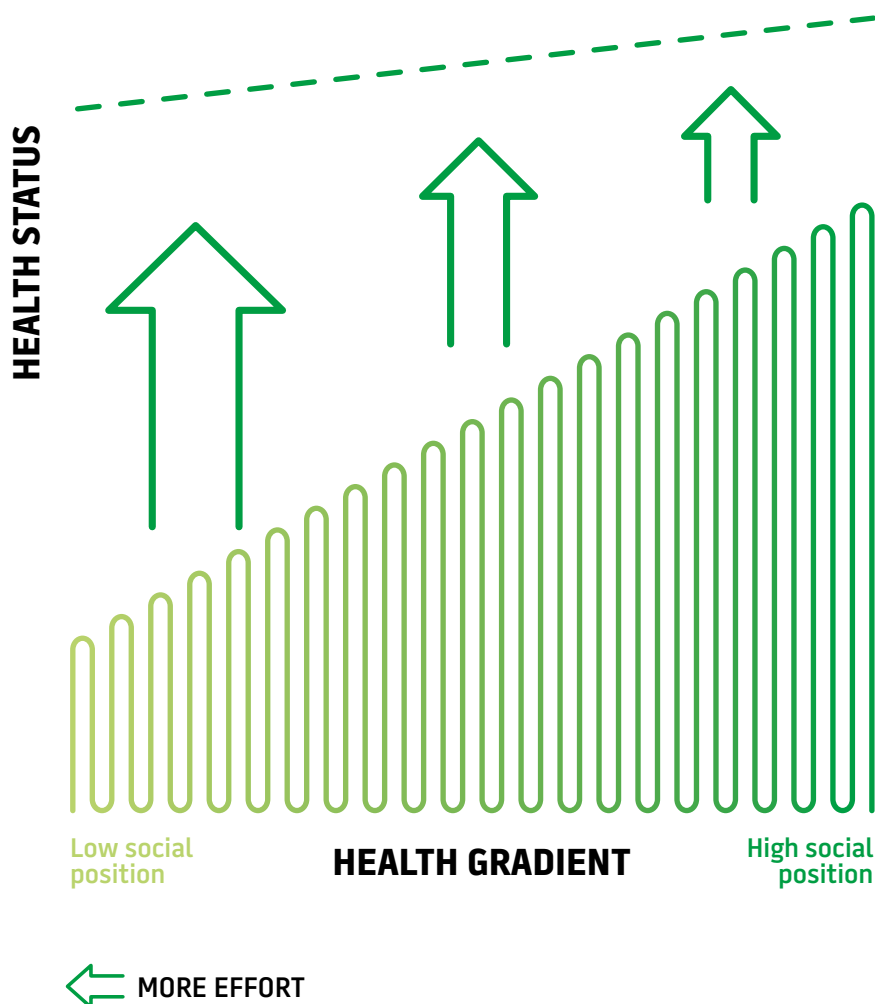
VicHealth's approach of integrating equity into all that we do is vital for us as an exemplar organisation. Health equity promotion will be made explicit, deliberate and routine at VicHealth, and we will demonstrate and share what we learn.

We will strengthen the capacity of the Victorian health promotion sector by providing evidence-based training, tools and resources, and by working and learning together. Increased capacity will support a broader and stronger focus on health equity in Victoria.

In partnership with governments, communities and the social sector, VicHealth will share insights and evidence, increasing our visibility and influence on social equity issues relevant to health. We will also learn from and work with new partners, to make sure that our work to improve the health and wellbeing of one million more Victorians also helps tackle wider social problems affecting the Victorian community and is sustainable over the long term.

Measuring progress

Measuring progress is vital to ensuring that our approach to health equity delivers what we set out to achieve. VicHealth's evaluation system uses a series of health equity indicators that enable us to track the effectiveness of programs. The ultimate measure of success will be a levelling of social gradients in health indicators (Figure 3). Although we recognise that this will take time, it is still important to track progress towards this goal. The VicHealth Indicators Survey, which collects data on factors known to influence individual and community wellbeing in Victoria at a population level, will be used to monitor changes in social gradients for each of our priority areas.



Adapted from Health Inequalities Commissioning Framework – NHS Kensington and Chelsea (2011)

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