

THE HON. JILL HENNESSY MP

Minister for Health

We are pleased to feature The Hon. Jill Hennessy MP who is Minister for Health and Minister for Ambulance Services. Ms Hennessy has been Member for Altona District since 2010.

What have been the biggest challenges you have faced in your first year as Minister for Health?

Can I firstly say that I am very proud to have been Victoria's Health Minister for almost 12 months now, and part of a Government that is working hard to deliver a strong health system.

As a Government, we are not blind to the challenges that our system faces.

Our population is growing. Our population is ageing and it's widely known that chronic diseases are the most significant health challenge of our generation.

We all know that preventable illnesses – such as diabetes, heart disease and some cancers – are a significant issue for all Victorians.

While I believe we have one of the best health systems in the world, there are challenges nonetheless; part of this is to continually drive innovation as consumer expectations increase and the nature of healthcare changes.

We need a health system that empowers people to lead healthier lives, and that educates them about how to stay well.

We need a health system that uses the fantastic talents of its doctors, nurses, allied health workers and medical researchers to develop innovative treatment options, discover new diagnostic tools, new treatments, cures, and technologies.

Importantly, we need to have a mature conversation about how we can work

together to ensure our health system delivers the vital services it needs to, to all Victorians.

Innovation will be key to sustainably increasing the capacity of our health system to meet growing demand. And the real challenge is how to identify and embed innovation across the system.

Undoubtedly, there are challenges but we have an incredible health workforce and I think we're well placed to respond to them.

This year you released the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015-2019. How does this differ to previous plans? What are you most excited about in the plan?

We were very fortunate to work with stakeholders right across Victoria to develop the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015-2019.

The health sector has expressed the need for better approaches to health promotion that tackle the complex, underlying causes of ill health in our communities.

I believe the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015-2019 delivers on this; it outlines the Government's commitment to creating a healthier Victoria.

It provides the directions and priorities for all of us - policy makers, health services, businesses, communities and individuals – to collectively seek to improve the health and wellbeing of all Victorians, particularly over the next four years.

The plan has an ambitious vision, for a Victoria free of the avoidable burden of disease and injury, so that all Victorians can enjoy the highest attainable standards of health, wellbeing, and participation at every age.

The priorities include healthier eating and active living, tobacco free living, improving mental health, reducing the harmful effects of alcohol and drugs, preventing violence and injury and improving sexual and reproductive health.



The Plan highlights the many factors that influence the health and wellbeing of individuals and our community.

It acknowledges the need for safe and sustainable natural and built environments; for affordable, quality food, for stable employment and good working conditions, secure housing, and freedom from violence, and for respectful relationships, supportive social networks and services, and opportunities to participate in community life.

These are all factors which will impact our health and wellbeing now and that of generations to come.

I am excited about this plan because it commits us to reducing inequalities in health and wellbeing among our community.

I am excited and inspired by the passion and commitment of our health organisations to work together.

The vision expressed in the plan places Victoria in an excellent position to deliver on our task of improving the health of our population. I look forward to working hard to support the plan, and ensuring we have clear priorities and are measuring our successes.

The Plan acknowledges the contribution and roles of those sectors outside the health system that influence the wider determinants of health. How will the government engage these other sectors?

We know that many public health problems have complex and multiple causes, many of which sit outside of the capacity of the health system to control. Let's take the examples of increasing healthy eating and physical activity, which are protective factors for many chronic diseases. In order to increase healthy eating and active living for all Victorians we need to take action in multiple ways and in multiple places.

We need to think about how our environment supports our health.

The health of our food system, for instance, is impacted by the quality of our soil, our water and the reliability of our climate. Without these things, we lose our ability to grow fresh and healthy produce for our communities.

We need to ensure that the places where we spend our time support good health, whether it is in our workplaces, our schools, or our communities.

We need to make sure that healthy food is easily accessible and affordable for all, and that physical activity is encouraged throughout the day.

And, we need to ensure that our health services put people at the centre of everything they do, supporting good health through education, health literacy and empowerment.

Across all of these areas, we need to focus on how we can best support the needs of our population at all stages of life. Clearly, many of these elements are beyond the control of the health system. Some are beyond the control of the Victorian Government.

In order to achieve this breadth of change, the Victorian Government needs to work together with local government, with the Commonwealth Government and with our sector partners. We are currently developing a Public Health and Wellbeing Action Plan that will document the commitments and opportunities to improve public health and wellbeing in the priority areas identified in the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015-2019. These commitments and opportunities will be drawn from across government, government agencies, the health sector and the wider community.

The Action Plan will be developed through a consultation process across government and with existing networks of stakeholders whose work addresses the priorities and strategic directions identified in the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015-2019. Further consultation will be held with state-wide stakeholders whose work spans the breadth of public health and wellbeing. The first Action Plan will span commitments and opportunities over 2015-2017 and will be refreshed every two years, enabling continuous improvement.

There is a strong focus on health inequality in the Plan. How will the Health Department work with other departments to address the causes of this inequality?

Because we know that people experiencing social disadvantage tend to have poorer

health outcomes – and we must change this – we need to ensure that throughout everything we do, we are reducing inequalities in health and wellbeing across our communities and ensuring that all Victorians have the opportunity to live long, happy and fulfilling lives.

Socioeconomic disadvantage is the greatest cause of health inequality in the state, and those with the fewest financial and social resources often experience the poorest health outcomes.

This can be seen in 10 year difference in life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians, and the fact that the rate of smoking for people experiencing psychological distress is double the rate for other Victorians.

The priorities of the Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2015-2019 reflect the causes of poor health that lead to the greatest inequality in outcomes. This plan also places a strong focus on the wider determinants such as housing, social inclusion, economic participation, education and gender that contribute to an inequality in health outcomes.

Delivering meaningful improvements in health and wellbeing requires collaboration and coordination across government in order to champion public health and wellbeing as an outcome everyone contributes to. Through this collective impact, that will be demonstrated in the Public Health and Wellbeing Action Plan, and by addressing the determinants of health and wellbeing, the Victorian Government will seek to address the causes of inequality.

The Action Plan will include targets for improved health and wellbeing to be achieved in Victoria by 2025. If we consider just one example, reducing tobacco usage, the Action Plan could include targets such as decreased proportions of Aboriginal Victorians and Victorians with a mental illness and Victorians in the bottom two SEIFA quintiles, who smoke. Partners who contribute to achieving these results could include government departments such as the Department of Justice and Regulation, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources; local governments; health service providers, QUIT, VACCHO, ACCHOs, mental health service providers and many others.

In addition to developing the Action plan, we are also developing a Public Health and

Wellbeing Outcomes Framework, which will detail impact and outcome measures and targets for the strategic directions of the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015-2019.

The Outcomes Framework will include indicators and measures of health and wellbeing and health inequality such as gender, age, income, location/local government area, Aboriginality, cultural and linguistic diversity and LGBTI – depending on the data that is available. The framework will be used to regularly report on the health and wellbeing of Victorians, including changes over time, and the equity of changes.

What do you see as the key challenges and opportunities in preventive health in the next three years?

Chronic disease is the most significant health challenge of our generation.

It accounts for approximately 85 per cent of Australia's burden of disease and many chronic diseases are preventable if we can reduce the risk factors.

And one of the most significant risk factors that we face today is obesity.

Sixty-three percent of Victorian adults are now overweight or obese, as are approximately a quarter of our children.

These are astounding figures. And they highlight that obesity is an issue that we must tackle with urgency.

But tackling obesity is not something that we can do alone.

We all need to work together – across government, across business and industry, and across our communities – to create changes that will benefit our whole population.

An area in particular, is sugary drinks – the largest source of sugar in the Australian diet.

A single can of soft drink a day can lead to 6.5 kilograms of extra weight a year, as well as increase the risk of type 2 diabetes by 18 per cent.

I'm really pleased that over the next 12 months, more than 50 organisations across Victoria – YMCA Victoria, Cancer Council Victoria, Heart Foundation, Obesity Policy Coalition, Diabetes Victoria, VicHealth and many more – are working together to focus attention on sugary drinks.

Healthier eating and active living are a basic key to good health, and a priority of the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan. ■