



Australian Academy
of Health and
Medical Sciences

AAHMS submission to the consultation on a Draft National Consumer Engagement Strategy for Health and Wellbeing

September 2023

The Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences (AAHMS) welcomes the Australian Government's efforts to develop a National Consumer Engagement Strategy for Health and Wellbeing (the Strategy). We strongly support this important initiative and stand ready to assist the Government where needed.

AAHMS is Australia's Learned Academy for health and medicine – the impartial, authoritative, cross-sector voice for the sector. We advance research and innovation in Australia to improve everyone's health.

We are an independent, interdisciplinary body of Fellows – elected by peers for outstanding achievements and exceptional contributions to health and medical science in Australia. Collectively, AAHMS Fellows are a representative and independent voice, through which we engage with the community, industry and governments.

Our response has been informed by input from Fellows of the Academy.

Q. Are you supportive of the overall purpose, vision and aim of the Strategy?

The National Consumer Engagement Strategy for Health and Wellbeing has been developed in relation to delivering the National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030 – the latter provides clear evidence on the social and economic advantages to improving health and reduce the burden of disease from chronic conditions in Australia. However, a significant gap remains between the stated intentions of the National Preventive Health Strategy and the commitment and resources needed for successful implementation. The National Consumer Engagement Strategy for Health and Wellbeing (the Strategy) is a welcome step towards implementation of the relevant priority actions identified in the National Preventive Health Strategy and AAHMS is very supportive of its overall purpose, vision and aim.

Consumer and community engagement in policy-making is an essential foundation to achieving better health outcomes for the Australian community. AAHMS is pleased to see the level of community and consumer engagement that has occurred throughout the development of the Strategy, and we are broadly supportive of the objectives, fundamentals, guidelines and toolkit. In fact, we would suggest that these objectives could be broadened to make it clear that consumer engagement goes beyond trust, engagement and empowerment, to consumers and the community informing decisions about healthcare services and systems. Should each of these elements be successfully utilised by policy-makers, we believe there will be meaningful benefits for all stakeholders and improvements to policy design, implementation and evaluation.

However, we urge the Government to consider the wider system and culture within which consumer and community engagement in policy-making for preventive health exists. The Strategy's suggested approach to good practice in this space will rely heavily on an environment that is specifically designed to facilitate this type of engagement. The following areas should be considered further as the Government works towards delivering on the proposed purpose of the Strategy.

Systemic and operational barriers to consumer and community engagement in policy-making

At present, there are numerous systemic and operational barriers that could prevent policy makers from engaging with consumers and communities to the extent described in the Strategy. For instance, current timelines, practices and expectations for policy-making do not necessarily align directly with the guidelines for good practice.

As highlighted in the Strategy, ideal consumer and community engagement does not happen on a predetermined timeline. Consumer and community ways of working may not always align neatly with policy-making and the goals of each of these stakeholders may differ. While the Strategy proposes several ways to manage these challenges, ultimately, the system and culture will need to allow for the dynamic and non-linear nature of this type of engagement – without this, it will be difficult to remove all the barriers. The Strategy should incorporate a bigger picture vision for this system so that consumers, communities, policymakers and other stakeholders can apply the Strategy's fundamentals and guidelines within a landscape that encourages, incentivises and nurtures this activity.

Whole-of-government response to preventive health

The National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030 recognises that a whole-of-government response is required at all levels to create a stronger and more effective prevention system. It focuses on prevention not only within the current health system, but also beyond, involving other sectors and industries that can have a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of the Australian community.

Although the Consumer Engagement Strategy is a resource for all policy makers, it must also acknowledge that there are different approaches to consumer and community engagement across sectors. In addition, cross-sector collaboration on consumer and community engagement for preventive health policy will pose its own unique challenges. These challenges must be considered and addressed if the Strategy aims to contribute to the implementation of a prevention system that goes beyond existing silos.

The Department of Health and Aged Care should take a leadership role in advocating for and supporting consumer and community engagement in all policy development, implementation and evaluation across government and sectors. By developing the Strategy, the Department has already demonstrated its ability to advance this important agenda. AAHMS believes it should continue its leadership role to ensure consumer and community engagement based on good practice becomes commonplace in all policy-making that has the potential to influence preventive health outcomes.

Q. Do you have any other comments or suggestions?

Terminology

We are pleased to see the Strategy defines 'consumers' and 'communities' broadly to include individuals, carers and families. We are aware that some consumers have encountered

situations in which this terminology has not been used as inclusively. Users of the Strategy should be sensitive to this when progressing their work in this area.

Research as an enabler

Insights gained from research are crucial to the development of evidence-informed policy-making, and these endeavours increasingly incorporate consumer and community involvement. Consumers and communities can provide important perspectives for generating research questions, setting research priorities, understanding how research can be translated into practice, monitoring the effectiveness of implementation in practice and more.

Consumer and community engagement in health and medical research aims to follow many of the same objectives and guidelines as described in the Strategy. This type of engagement – when done well – can enhance the responsiveness and relevance of research to policy-making. Investing in consumer and community engagement can therefore benefit both consumers and policy-makers by engaging research as an additional mechanism through which to build trust, translate consumer perspectives and mobilise participation.

Our 2021 report, 'Research and innovation as core functions in transforming the health system: A vision for the future of health in Australia' (<https://aahms.org/vision/>) identified four pillars for creating a research-rich health system – one of which was consumer and community involvement. The report described how Australia can better advance consumer and community engagement in health and medical research. It highlighted gaps in Australia's approach and identified opportunities to do better and learn from researchers and communities that are on the right track. Many of the challenges experienced in involving consumers and communities in policy-making also exist in health and medical research, but many of the solutions could be developed by, and benefit, both sectors. To work towards these mutual goals, the Department should ensure the Strategy informs other important work that it is also undertaking, especially the development of a national health and medical research strategy. The Department should also support better community and consumer engagement in health and medical research through its policies, advocacy and funding.

For questions about this submission, or to arrange a consultation with Fellows and Associate Members of the Academy, please contact Lanika Mylvaganam, Head of Policy (policy@aahms.org) at the Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences. The Academy is grateful for the input received from our Fellows and Associate Members in developing this submission.

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