



IRISH MEDICAL
ORGANISATION
Ceardchumann Dochtúirí na hÉireann

IMO Submission to the Department Of Health on
Your Health is Your Wealth
Public Health Policy Framework 2012-2020

September 2011

Consultation Questionnaire

Your Health is Your Wealth – Public Health Policy Framework 2012-2020

1. What would you like the public health policy to achieve?

The Irish Medical Organisation welcomes the development of a Public Health Policy which should set out a transparent Framework for improving population health over the period 2012-2020 through the promotion of strategies that:

- recognise and address the social, economic, environmental and lifecourse factors that determine health;
- promote healthy lifestyle choices and the prevention of chronic disease;
- manage and control the spread of infectious diseases, including sexually transmitted diseases, and other public health threats;
- ensure the early detection and treatment of child health and development problems;
- place disease prevention at the very centre of health and social policy.

The Public Health Policy must be accompanied by a comprehensive implementation plan which identifies the financial and human resources necessary and establishes clear links between resources, timeframe and public health outcomes.

2. How do you think organisations and communities can work together to achieve better public health?

Good health is socially, economically and environmentally determined. A wide range of factors - such as poverty, inequality, social exclusion, employment, income, education, housing conditions, transport, access to health care, access to safe and affordable food, lifestyle, stress - impact significantly on an individual's health and wellbeing. Evidence shows that lower socio-economic groups have relatively high mortality rates, higher levels of ill health and fewer resources to adopt healthier lifestyles. Policy choices implemented by all departments and not just the department of health can therefore significantly impact on an individual's health thus a cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach is necessary for the implementation of public health policy.

The IMO recommend:

- An immediate review of inequalities and inequities in health to include inequalities in health status, and inequities in access to health care by socio-economic grouping and geographic location;
- The establishment of an inter-sectoral committee to prioritise the development and implementation of evidence-based initiatives across departments and across sectors;
- The significant role that Public Health and Community Health Doctors make to population health must be recognised and resourced. Public Health and Community Health Doctors have been particularly hard hit by the HSE's moratorium on recruitment. An integrated public health workforce plan should be developed;
- Steps must be taken to ensure that Public Health Medicine and Community Health Medicine are made attractive options to medical students and doctors in training in order to maintain the capacity of the specialty;
- At present there is insufficient training available specific to the needs of Community Health Doctors. The IMO would like to see the establishment of a faculty in this specialty.

3. What mechanisms for governance, accountability and leadership are needed to ensure delivery and implementation?

In view of the large contribution social determinants make to the health status of the population of Ireland, the IMO recommend the establishment of a Minister of Public Health with direct responsibility for overseeing the delivery and implementation of Public Health Policy and to ensure that public policy is health proofed across all Government Departments.

The Minister for Public Health should have a statutory function in each of the Departments involved and funding within each department should be ring-fenced for Public Health initiatives.

The Office of the Minister for Public Health should also be responsible for ensuring that Health Impact Assessments are carried out on all new government policies at design, implementation and review stages. In addition a national public health executive agency should be established to drive progress and be accountable for implementing policies set by the Public Health Minister.

The contribution of Public Health measures to the overall economic strength and well-being of Ireland should be recognised through priority funding. Secured funding for Public Health is of vital importance, particularly in view of the Government's plans to introduce universal health insurance - a funding mechanism which traditionally caters poorly for Public Health requirements.

4. What are your two key messages to make Ireland's public health policy first class.

Public health has been defined by the US National Institute of Medicine, as that which "we, as a society do collectively to ensure the conditions in which people can be healthy". In other words, the health and wellbeing of the citizens of a nation are as a result of a contract drawn up between the government and citizens of a country in which health and wellbeing are seen as important ends in themselves. A healthy population is a sound economic investment, being more economically productive and consuming fewer health and social support resources.

The two key messages that the IMO would like to make to ensure Ireland's public health policy is first class are:

1. Funding for public health is a cost-effective investment in the health of our population and the future of our country.
2. Public health must be placed at the centre of all policy decision making .

5. Please comment on any other issues that you would like to raise?

Focus on Child Health Services

'A vital and productive society with a prosperous and sustainable future is built on a foundation of healthy child development. Health in the earliest years - beginning with the future mother's wellbeing before she becomes pregnant - lays the groundwork for a lifetime of vitality. When developing biological systems are strengthened by positive early experiences, children are more likely to thrive and grow up to be healthy adults The biological sciences have two clear and powerful messages for leaders who are searching for more effective ways to improve the health of the nation. First, current health promotion and disease prevention policies focused on adults would be more effective if evidence-based investments were also made to strengthen the foundations of health in the prenatal and early childhood periods. Second, significant reductions in chronic disease could be achieved across the life course by decreasing the number and severity of adverse experiences that threaten the wellbeing of young children and by strengthening the protective relationships that help mitigate the harmful effects of toxic stress'. (Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child, 2010).

Renewed focus and investment is needed in Child Health Services.

Lifecourse Determinants of Health and Disease

Patterns of health, illness and disease are influenced at different stages of the lifecourse by a combination of genetic and environmental factors. Research has demonstrated that during early development, the way in which the developing fetus responds to a range of nutritional and other factors is likely to be an important contributor to disease, as described by the 'developmental origins' hypothesis. Later environmental exposures during infancy, childhood and adult life may modify this later risk of disease. In middle and later life, social, psychological, physical and occupational factors in the environment can cause or accentuate risk of ill health and disease.

Research at the MRC Lifecourse Epidemiology Unit, University of Southampton encompasses health determinants throughout the entire lifecourse, from the prenatal phase, through infancy, childhood and working life, on into old age. Further research is needed into the Lifecourse Determinants of Health.

The IMO recommend that Ireland research and develop national competence in Lifecourse Epidemiology.

Sexual Health

Finally, incidences of Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) have grown dramatically particularly among young people. The IMO recommend the development of a comprehensive strategy for the promotion of sexual health in Ireland and the expansion of sexually transmitted disease clinics on a regional basis.