



THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS

## Health and the Environment

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### **Aim**

To draw attention to current public health issues in terms of physical, social and economic aspects of the environment and to recommend appropriate roles of general practitioners in relation to these.

### **Background**

#### Physical Environment

In terms of the physical environment, current issues of concern relate to ecologically sustainable development and protection of air, water and soil quality.

Ecologically Sustainable Development: There is increasing recognition of the finite nature of natural resources, many of which have implications for health and well-being.<sup>1</sup> The limits on these resources have implications for their equitable distribution both throughout society and for future generations.

Protection of Air, Water and Soil Quality: There is increasing evidence that the air, water and soil quality in Australia has been significantly affected by pollution.<sup>2</sup> Issues such as photochemical smog, blue green algae, lead pollution and soil contamination and degradation have become major community concerns in relation to health.<sup>3</sup>

#### Social and Economic Environment

In terms of the social and economic environment, current issues of concern relate to the impact of low socio-economic status and social deprivation on the health of families. Groups with particular vulnerability include the unemployed and their families, elderly people living in inappropriate housing, disabled people and supporting parents.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of all these aspects of the environment, Aboriginal people, in particular, are exposed to a much poorer physical and economic environment.<sup>5</sup>

### **Position of the RACGP**

- The RACGP recognises the important influence that the physical, social and economic environment has on the health and well being of the community. While the interaction between these influences and health is complex, these matters are of considerable importance to public health.
- The RACGP considers that it is appropriate for GPs to take up a public health role which involves being aware of the relationship between health and broader aspects of society. This will impact on advice given within the doctor patient relationship as well as the adoption by GPs of healthy work practices. It may involve GPs in a broader community based role in relation to issues of population health.

### **Recommended Role for Individual GPs**

General practitioners have an important role in a public health capacity. This may involve:

- identifying environmental factors which may have an impact on the health of their patients
- educating their patients on those factors in their environment which may affect their health, particularly those over which they may have some control (e.g. reducing passive smoking or exposure to environmental pollutants, advice about sources of financial and social support)
- as the co-ordinator of patient care, informing other health professionals and services of the influence of the physical, social and economic environment on patients whose care they share
- advocacy on behalf of their patients in reducing exposure or dealing with the effects of environmental hazards (e.g. negotiating with employers of agricultural workers exposed to pesticides)
- identifying areas where co-operative action is required at either local, regional or national level as a group or in contact with other groups (e.g. in relation to exposure to lead; health effects of unemployment).

Specifically, in terms of work practices in general practice, the RACGP recommends that its members:

- examine their current work practices and workplace to ensure that they are conserving resources, e.g. by using recycled materials or more efficient use of energy
- ensure that their own waste disposal practices are satisfactory and recognise that these have important influences on the health of their patients and their communities
- inform the relevant public health authorities of adverse health impacts which they observe in the course of their work and where necessary advocate for action to reduce environmental hazards

- ensure that they make the best use of existing community resources in supporting families
- recognise the adverse impact which their environment has on the health of these groups and work with others to reduce the inequalities in health outcomes for disadvantaged groups.

### **References**

1. NH&MRC Ecologically Sustainable Development: The Health Perspective. June 1992.
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3. Nutbeam D., Wise, M., Bauman A., Harris E, Leeder S. Goals and Targets for Australia's Health in the Year 2000 and Beyond. Department of Public Health. University of Sydney. 1993.
4. Social Justice Strategy 1992. Project Report on the Council Area Research Studies on Locational Disadvantage. Commonwealth Department of Health, Housing and Community Services.
5. A National Aboriginal Health Strategy. National Health Strategy Working Party. March 1989.

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