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Is vision really at risk?

■ **When I commenced my role as Publications Fellow at *Australian Family Physician* I was assigned this 'Vision at risk' issue. Initially I considered very concrete issues for my editorial, but recent events have me thinking far more metaphorically about vision.**

My academic registrar position has allowed me to attend conferences where I have heard several visions for primary care. In combination with major governmental reports and strategies I must confess I am confused about which vision is the vision, and how all these ideas will translate into action. Kirsty Douglas at the 2009 General Practice and Primary Health Care Research conference aptly referred to all this activity as a 'plandemic'.¹ This much needed, complex review of our health system represents a great opportunity for primary care.

Curious, I made brief forays into each of the three key reports to determine the scope of change proposed and how they translate into concrete policy suggestions. Excitingly all three strategic groups included general practice representation – in itself an acknowledgement of the importance of primary care.

Intriguingly, the specificity of the report policy recommendations appears to be inversely proportional to the breadth of the document scope. Building a 21st Century Primary Health Care System – A Draft of Australia's First National Primary Health Care Strategy² has the narrowest scope confining itself to reform of the primary health care sector. It clearly acknowledges the importance of primary care but constitutes 'a road map for the future... not a detailed implementation plan'.²

The next tier, A Healthier Future for All Australians – Final Report of the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission³ also considers primary care critical: 'Strengthened primary health care services should be the 'first contact'... This builds on the vital role of general practice'.³ This report is slightly more concrete providing 100 recommendations for health sector reform from primary through to tertiary care.

The broadest of the three reports, Australia: The Healthiest Country by 2020 – National Preventative Health Strategy – Overview,⁴ moves the debate beyond the health sector. Doing so sacrifices the prominent position of general practice in exchange for broader health advocacy. There are minimal direct references to primary care. The strategic partnerships discussion highlights the importance

of 'professional associations across a range of health promotion, primary care and nonhealth sectors'. Refocusing the primary health care sector toward prevention is the seventh strategic direction⁴ acknowledging 'the current limitations of the primary health care system in Australia in its inability to address lifestyle factors'. The strength of this document is the specific, phased recommendations across multiple sectors simply summarised in colour coded tables. Combined with an action driven cyclical approach of 'do, measure, report' it provides the clearest plan for policy action.

What does this all mean for our wider health sector and general practice in particular? I'm still not sure. Common themes across the documents are a focus on equity, streamlining services, improved co-ordination and emphasis on prevention. There is much talk of blended payment systems, teamwork and flexibility. The clarity of this 'vision' will evolve over time and general practice will be involved in subsequent action. As a profession we need to continue to be active participants in the process – leading and responding to change rather than hiding and avoiding it.

Returning to more concrete concepts, this issue of *AFP* provides an update on ophthalmology. Gould et al provide a useful framework for assessing and managing acute visual loss; Fong and Lee explore common intrinsic chronic eye diseases; while Spurling et al provide a concise summary of diabetic retinopathy. I'm sure you will find them useful in protecting your patients' vision. In a broader sense I hope you also give thought and voice to your vision for Australia's new health system.

References

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3. National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission. A healthier future for all Australians – Final Report of the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission. Publication No: P3-5499. Canberra: Australian Department of Health and Ageing, 2009.
4. National Preventative Taskforce. Australia: The healthiest country by 2020 – National Preventative Health Strategy – Overview. Publication No: P3-5457. Canberra: Australian Department of Health and Ageing, 2009.