This prescription for a healthier New Zealand has been prepared by the New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine (NZCPHM) as a Briefing for the Incoming Minister of Health. It describes key health and social issues which affect the health status and well-being of all New Zealanders, and identifies strategies and actions that will address these issues effectively. The outcomes will be better health, enhanced quality of life, increased productivity and reduced burdens and costs to the health and social sectors.

Dr Caroline McElnay
President, NZCPHM

The NZCPHM represents the medical specialty of public health medicine in New Zealand. We have over 220 members including 191 fully qualified specialists and 35 registrars who are doctors in training in the speciality.

Public Health Medicine is defined as the branch of medicine concerned with the epidemiological analysis of the health and health care of populations and population groups. It involves the assessment of population health and health care needs, the development of policy and strategy, health promotion, the control and prevention of disease, and the organisation of services. Public health also includes reducing inequalities across socioeconomic and cultural groups, and promoting environments in which everyone can be healthy.
**IMPROVE HEALTH EQUITY**

Addressing health inequities is primarily a human rights issue; doing so is also cost effective in the long term. In developed countries, the majority of the critical influences on health lie outside of the health sector. Inaction on the social determinants of health threatens to undermine social development and economic growth by widening the gap in health status between population groups.\(^1\)

**Strategy**
Take a whole-of-government approach to improving health and reducing health disparities.

**Actions**
- Assess policies addressing education, employment, housing, taxation, and social security for ‘health impact’
- Ensure Māori and Pasifika are provided with culturally appropriate and accessible health services
- Provide local, affordable health care for disadvantaged population groups such as refugees and those on low incomes
- Continue investment in policies that improve everyone’s health such as fluoridating water and immunisations

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**REDUCE CHILD POVERTY RATES & IMPROVE CHILD HEALTH**

New Zealand has an unacceptably high number of children growing up in material poverty (20-25%). Children living in deprivation are much more likely to suffer from preventable disease, poor nutrition, and injury from abuse, maltreatment, or neglect. Māori and Pacific children would benefit most from efforts to reduce poverty rates.

**Strategy**
Develop and adopt a cross-sectoral, whole-of-government plan to reduce child poverty which identifies greater, sustained investment in policies and services for children, particularly in early childhood, and has active surveillance and reporting of measurable targets.

**Action**
- Implement the recommendations in The Best Start in Life report and the Health Select Committee’s report which include comprehensive and cohesive recommendations.\(^2,3\)
Climate change is almost certainly contributing to major health issues, growing disease burdens and increasing the number of premature deaths for populations around the world. The continuing health effects are potentially catastrophic and New Zealanders will not be immune from the consequences. Well-planned action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions can also bring substantial health gains.

**BE PREPARED FOR, & MINIMISE, THE HEALTH & ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE**

**Strategy**
Encourage action from the public, institutions, and government to address climate change across the board.

**Actions**
- Set more ambitious targets for greenhouse gas emissions i.e. to be in keeping with the Greenhouse Development Rights framework\(^4\)
- Incentivise carbon-neutral business and health sector practices
- Redesign transport infrastructure to encourage active travel
- Stop new, and phase out existing, fossil fuel extraction – while supporting local communities
- Promote public awareness that red meat and animal fat consumption are linked to greenhouse gas emissions
- Incentivise home insulation

**IMPROVE THE QUALITY & QUANTITY OF NEW ZEALAND’S HOUSING STOCK**

Healthy housing is a fundamental requirement for a healthy population and cost-effectively leads to fewer exacerbations of respiratory illness, fewer GP visits and hospitalisations, less time off work/school, and reduced energy use. Poor housing conditions are also linked to crowding-related infectious diseases, injury, social problems, and mental health issues.

**Strategy**
Develop and implement a long-term housing plan that prioritises healthy housing for our population.

**Actions**
- Require regulated minimum standards for all rental houses backed by evidence-based assessment, i.e. ensuring houses are:
  - Insulated
  - Dry and ventilated
  - Safe – reducing injury hazards through installation of handrails, smoke detectors, and visibility strips on glass doors etc.
  - Secure
  - Equipped with essential amenities, e.g. working toilets, electric lighting, kitchen sink
- Continue incentivising home insulation
- Ensure adequate and affordable housing is available by the most sustainable means
- Use census data and demographic projections to anticipate housing stock pressure points for future planning
INCREASE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY & IMPROVE NUTRITION

Strategy
Develop and implement a long-term multi-sectoral plan to address obesity, poor nutrition and physical activity. Reorient everyday environments such as urban, education and food environments, to make physical activity and healthy eating the easy choice.

Actions
- Implement the nine recommendations outlined in the NZMA Policy Brief: Tackling Obesity.
- Ensure that a healthy diet (high in fruit and vegetables) is affordable and raise awareness of the health risks of diets high in salt, animal fat, and alcohol.
- Local governments to prioritise safe, active transport in their urban infrastructure
- Promote ways to keep active every day and increase awareness that being sedentary negatively affects health
- Encourage food and beverage companies to reduce the fat, salt and sugar content of commonly consumed products
- Tax sugar-sweetened beverages to fund support for the management of obesity and diabetes
- Provide publically-funded support for people wanting to lose weight to prevent ill-health and reduce the need for expensive treatment interventions
- Promote breastfeeding over formula use

MAKE NEW ZEALAND SMOKEFREE BY 2025

Smoking kills 4500–5000 people in New Zealand every year and is linked to many diseases including asthma, chronic obstructive respiratory disease, lung cancer, and other cancers. It is a leading, preventable contributor to health inequity.

Strategy
Complete action on the Māori Affairs Select Committee recommendations in 2010.

Actions
- Increase the unit price of tobacco products
- Continue mass media campaigns
- Continue to support school-based education programmes
- Prioritise smoke-free environments legislation
- Continue to promote ‘quit’ programmes

By 2016, obesity (high BMI) is projected to overtake tobacco as the leading cause of health loss in New Zealand. Physical inactivity and poor diet are the major causes of obesity, impacting throughout the life course and contributing to health inequalities. These factors also contribute to disease burdens such as type 2 diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease and cancers.
Unsafe alcohol use accounts for approximately 24% of all injuries and 18% of all mental illness (mainly through alcohol use disorders) in New Zealand\(^6\).

**REDUCE HARM FROM ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION**

**Strategy**

Strengthen measures to change New Zealand’s drinking culture and reduce the hazardous consumption of alcohol.

**Actions**

- Increase the price of alcohol
- Raise the purchase age of alcohol
- Reduce accessibility to alcohol
- Reduce marketing and advertising of alcoholic beverages
- Increase drink-driving counter-measures
- Increase treatment opportunities for heavy drinkers

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**FURTHER INFORMATION**

Further information on these key health and social issues is available in the NZCPHM policy statements on Health Equity, The First 1000 Days of Life, Climate Change, Transport, Tobacco Control, Alcohol, Housing, Child Poverty and Health, and other NZCPHM publications available at http://www.nzcphm.org.nz/policy-publications

**REFERENCES**