

A long-term national health strategy

Learning from the success of the Australian response to HIV/AIDS, our nation's long-term health strategy should be driven by prevention, partnership, and personal empowerment and responsibility. Australia should shift the focus of its health system towards preventing illness rather than treating it once it has occurred. The Commonwealth should work with affected communities and community-based organisations (CBOs) to deliver programs that are targeted and culturally appropriate. A national strategy should aim to empower all Australians to make decisions about, and take responsibility for, their own health, while at the same time installing a culture of shared responsibility for other's health and wellbeing.

Australia's internationally recognised approach to addressing HIV/AIDS demonstrates the benefit of working with, and empowering, affected communities through a preventative health framework. The gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community has faced enormous challenges in responding to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Australia. For over two decades, CBOs have been at the forefront of our country's HIV/AIDS response, providing support, care, and education and prevention services for the infected and affected communities. Through their partnership with both levels of government, researchers, clinicians, and those directly affected by HIV/AIDS, CBOs have worked to turn around an epidemic that is taking huge tolls in countries with a similar economic status, with Australia being one of the few countries to limit the virus to the population group of first contact (gay men).

Preventative health programs have been central to this success, with a focus on peer education provided by knowledgeable and competent community members. The community based response has been culturally appropriate, sensitive to current needs and targeted.

This successful approach should be emulated in emerging health issues such as mental health, and drug and alcohol use. Australia's long-term health strategy should recognise that in dealing with these two issues, either separately or together, that an effective response requires a broad range of services and approaches (medical and non-medical) that includes early intervention programs, and a focus on education and prevention. Where specific communities are identified as being affected by mental health and/or substance misuse, governments should seek to work with organisations based within those communities, given that they are ideally placed to understand the factors driving such health outcomes and deliver a response that is appropriate to that community.

Both mental health and alcohol and other drug use are issues that are of particular concern for the GLBT community, with higher rates of mental health diagnosis and substance use than the general population. This is compounded by the lack of health services that are accessible and appropriate to GLBT Australians. As it did in the 1980s with HIV/AIDS, the Commonwealth should work with the GLBT community to address mental health and drug and alcohol issues through partnership with GLBT health organisations. In doing so, it should be guided by the principles of prevention and empowering people to take responsibility for their health and that of those around them.