



Primary Health Care Matters

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What is primary health care?

Primary health care (PHC) is the first level of contact individuals, families and communities have with the health care system.

In Australia, PHC:

- incorporates personal care with health promotion, the prevention of illness and community development
- includes the interconnecting principles of equity, access, empowerment, community self-determination and inter-sectoral collaboration
- encompasses an understanding of the social, economic, cultural and political determinants of health.¹

A commonly used definition of Australian PHC is:

Primary health care is socially appropriate, universally accessible, scientifically sound first level care provided by health services and systems with a suitably trained workforce comprised of multi-disciplinary teams supported by integrated referral systems in a way that:

- gives priority to those most in need and addresses health inequalities
- maximises community and individual self-reliance, participation and control
- involves collaboration and partnership with other sectors to promote public health.

Comprehensive primary health care includes health promotion, illness prevention, treatment and care of the sick, community development, and advocacy and rehabilitation.²

The World Health Organization (WHO) Alma-Ata declaration of 1978, defined PHC as:

Essential health care based on practical, scientifically sound and socially acceptable methods and technology made universally

accessible to individuals and families in the community through their full participation and at a cost that the community and country can afford to maintain at every stage of their development in the spirit of self-reliance and self-determination.

It forms an integral part both of the country's health system, of which it is the central function and main focus, and of the overall social and economic development of the community. It is the first level of contact of individuals, the family and community with the national health system bringing health care as close as possible to where people live and work, and constitutes the first element of a continuing health care process.³

Australia's PHC Strategy

In 2010, the National Primary Health Care Strategy was introduced, incorporating a set of building blocks and priority areas to be addressed by Australian governments to improve health outcomes. This culminated in the National Health Reform Agreement 2011. Subsequently the national government worked with state and territory governments to develop a National Primary Health Care Strategic Framework.

The Strategy takes a broad view of comprehensive primary health care, extending beyond the 'general practice' focus of traditional Australian Government responsibility. It accounts for the importance of community-based PHC to respond to the needs of local communities by focusing on the integration of PHC with specialist care and other health sectors including acute care, aged care and Indigenous health services.

The yourHealth website <http://www.yourhealth.gov.au> is the Australian Government's key portal of health reform information. This website contains updates on national health reform progress and delivery and health reform publications.

Table 1: Differences between comprehensive and selective PHC

	Comprehensive PHC	Selective PHC
View of health	Positive wellbeing	Absence of disease
Locus of control over health	Communities and individuals	Health professionals
Major focus	Health through equity and community empowerment	Health through medical interventions
Health care providers	Multidisciplinary teams	Doctors plus other health professionals
Strategies for health	Multi-sectoral collaboration	Medical interventions

Source: Rogers W, Veale B. (2000). Primary Health Care: a scoping report. Adelaide: National Information Service, Department of General Practice, Flinders University (p. 18).

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Distinguishing between primary care and primary health care

The terms primary health care and primary care are terms often used interchangeably. The structures and practices of the primary care sector are not necessarily compatible with notions of comprehensive primary health care. Primary care is an essential part of comprehensive primary health care, but the latter extends beyond medical service provision to encompass a whole-of-system response to reducing the effects of disadvantage on health outcomes.

- Primary care refers to a person's first point of contact with the health system and involves the management of a person's illness or disease condition in a service that is typically contained to that care setting. This first point of contact usually includes the general practitioner or family physician.
- Primary health care extends beyond the biomedical model of care to a social model of health based on the philosophy that for health improvement to occur the social, political, environmental and economic determinants of illness must be addressed. This care is provided by a wider range of providers, services and functions.

Australia's comprehensive approach to PHC

Australia strives for a PHC framework based on a comprehensive definition of PHC that is distinguishable from selective PHC which focuses on treatment, rehabilitation and primary medical care (Table 1). A comprehensive approach to PHC takes into account the social determinants of health, health inequalities, health promotion, illness prevention, treatment and care of the sick, community development, advocacy, rehabilitation, inter-sectoral action and population health approaches.

PHC position statements

Various Australian PHC organisations have outlined their vision for Australia's primary health care system. These include:

- Australian Medicare Local Alliance (AML Alliance)
- Australian National Preventative Health Agency (ANPHA)
- Australian Medical Association (AMA)
- The Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation (ANMF),
- Australian Primary Health Care Nursing Association (APNA)
- Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA)

For links to their position statements visit:
http://www.phcris.org.au/guides/about_phc

Resources

All of the hyperlinks provided in this Fact Sheet are available online at PHCRIS Getting Started Guides: Introduction to... Primary Health Care
http://www.phcris.org.au/guides/about_phc

PHCRIS Getting Started Guides: Introduction to... Australian health reform
http://www.phcris.org.au/guides/health_reform.php

PHCRIS Getting Started Guides: Introduction to... Primary health care systems
http://www.phcris.org.au/guides/phc_international.php

PHCRIS Getting Started Guides: Introduction to... Nursing and primary health care
http://www.phcris.org.au/guides/nursing_and_phc.php

Further reading

Primary care: an increasingly important contributor to effectiveness, equity, and efficiency of health services.
Starfield, B. (2012). *SESPAS report 2012*. *Gac Sanit* 26 Suppl 1: 20-26. <http://www.gacetasanitaria.org/es/linkresolver/primary-care-an-increasingly-important/S0213911111003876/>

A renewed focus on primary health care: revitalize or reframe?
Bhatia M, Rifkin S. (2010). *Globalization and Health*, 6:13
doi:10.1186/1744-8603-6-13 <http://www.w.globalizationandhealth.com/content/6/1/13>

The breadth of primary care: a systematic literature review of its core dimensions
Kringos D, Boerma W, Hutchinson A, van der Zee J, Groenewegen P. (2010). *BMC Health Services Research*, 10:65.
<http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1472-6963-10-65.pdf>

Operational definitions of attributes of primary health care: Consensus among Canadian experts
Haggerty J, Burge F, Lévesque J, Gass D, Pineault R, Beaulieu M, Santor D. (2007). *Annals of Family Medicine*, 5(4), 36.
<http://www.annfammed.org/cgi/reprint/5/4/336>

Unravelling primary health care conceptual predicaments through the lenses of complexity and political economy: a position paper for progressive transformation
Felix-Bortolotti M. (2009). *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*. 15(5), 861-7.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1365-2753.2009.01274.x/pdf>

The World Health Report 2008: Primary Health Care (Now more than Ever)
World Health Organization. <http://www.who.int/whr/2008/en/>

Comprehensive Primary Health Care in Australia: findings from a narrative review of the literature. Hurley C, Baum F, Johns J, Labonte R. 2010 *Australian Medical Journal*, 1, 2, 147-152, Doi 10.4066/AMJ.2010.201 <http://www.globalhealthequity.ca/electronic%20library/Comprehensive%20Primary%20Health%20Care%20in%20Australia.pdf>

National Health Reform Agreement 2011
Commonwealth of Australia (2010) [http://www.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/NPHC-Strategic-Framework/\\$File/nphc_strategic_framework_final.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/NPHC-Strategic-Framework/$File/nphc_strategic_framework_final.pdf)

National Primary Health Care Strategic Framework
Commonwealth of Australia (2013) <http://www.yourhealth.gov.au/internet/yourhealth/publishing.nsf/Content/report-primaryhealth>

References

- 1 Keleher H. (2001). Why Primary Health Care Offers a more Comprehensive Approach to Tackling Health Inequalities than Primary Care. *Australian Journal of Primary Health*. 7(2), 57-61.
- 2 Definition developed by the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute (APHCRI) and cited in Primary Health Care Reform in Australia: Report to Support Australia's First National Primary Health Care Strategy (September 2009).
- 3 World Health Organization. (1978). Declaration of Alma Ata, International conference on PHC, Alma-Ata, USSR, 6-12 September, available from: www.who.int/hpr/NPH/docs/declaration_almaata.pdf (accessed January 2014).



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Publication date: February 2014