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THE ROLE OF POLICY IN IMPROVING PUBLIC HEALTH

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Policy is becoming an increasingly recognised approach to improving public health globally and within this region. What we mean by policy does vary widely though, and this causes some confusion and also can limit the value of policy-based approaches. Policy is usually mandatory or legislated for [1], and as such is a tool to try to ensure that a specific activity or activities occurs. Public policy is often used to refer to only those policies implemented by government [2-4]. So policies might be used within Health Services to ensure that a particular treatment protocol is always followed for diabetes. Policies might also be implemented via Decrees or Act for example to prevent smoking in certain areas. It is clear from just these two examples that health-related policy is already widely in use in Fiji across government and non-government sectors. Is sufficient use being made locally of this important tool in the efforts to improve health?

Global commitments have emphasised the need to include more policy interventions in efforts to improve health. The Bangkok Charter for Health Promotion in a Globalized World [5] states that action is needed across sectors and settings to “regulate and legislate to ensure a high level of protection from harm and enable equal opportunity for health and well-being for all people”. Focusing on the prevention of non-communicable diseases in Fiji, considerable policy-based approaches have been used to limit tobacco use, however in the areas of alcohol, diet and physical activity less policy-based approaches have been used locally. The WHO’s Global Strategy on diet and health [6] stated that “…health gains can be achieved much more readily by influencing public policies in sectors like trade, taxation, education, agriculture, urban development, food and pharmaceutical production than by making changes in health policy alone”. There is likely considerable potential to increase the use of policy-based approaches in Fiji, and these would complement other health-promotion strategies such as social marketing.

An important aspect of policy and health, is the impact of non-health sector policies on health. While many policies may be developed specifically to improve health, non-health policies will have an effect on health too. These effects, whilst unintentional, may be significant. For example, agricultural, land-use and fisheries policies impact on food supply and therefore diets [7-9]. It is therefore important that efforts to improve health span all sectors, and that all policy-making considers the potential impacts on health. The development of a supportive environment requires healthy public policies across all sectors [10-12].

‘Health in all policies’ [13] refers to this wider approach, which incorporates a wider view of the societal influences on health. How to ensure that all policies do consider health is proving more challenging globally. Many will be familiar with environmental impact assessments (EIA) which aim to ensure that policies or projects do not have negative impacts on the environment [14]. Health impact assessments (HIAs) or social impact assessments (SIAs) can be used in similar ways and if used during policy development can support efforts towards ‘health in all policies’. Therefore the widespread use of HIAs could ensure that non-health policies have only overall positive health effects, or that approaches are incorporated to counteract negative effects. While the use of HIAs have been recommended within the region [15, 16], their use to-date has been extremely limited.

There is potential for a greater use of policy tools to improve health in Fiji, and also for greater consideration of the health impacts of non-health sector policies. Health practitioners have important roles to play in leading efforts to develop health-promoting policies and in working across sectors to ensure that health impacts are considered during policy development.

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