Listening and consulting: developing a national men’s health policy for Australia

Helen Rankin¹, Julianne Quainne¹
¹Department of Health and Ageing

The Government made an election commitment in 2007 to develop a National Men’s Health Policy. This paper discusses the reasons for the policy, what the policy is intended to achieve, and the steps that have been taken in developing the policy. In particular the consultation process and the challenges this has presented in obtaining the views of a wide group of men, including rural men, will be discussed.

The reasons for developing a National Men’s Health Policy are clear. Australian men continue to suffer higher rates of mortality and morbidity than women across many significant health outcome indicators including mental health, cardiovascular disease, cancer and accident and injury. Despite this fact, men tend to also have fewer visits to their doctor and seek medical assistance at later stages in their illness. This can result in much worse health outcomes and more intensive and costly interventions.

These issues are magnified in rural and remote settings. According to Australia’s Health 2008:

Specific health status measures illustrate the generally poorer health of people living in rural and remote areas. Life expectancy decreases with increasing remoteness...life expectancy in regional areas is 1-2 years lower and for remote areas it is up to 7 years lower.

The Government has said it wants the policy to have a ‘back-to-basics’ approach that will focus on:

• addressing issues that men face in accessing health services;
• engaging men about their health and raising awareness of the range of preventable health issues; and
• targeting men with the poorest health.

In addition the Government has said the policy will address the needs of men with poorer health outcomes, for example:

• men from rural areas;
• men in lower socioeconomic groups;
• single fathers and others struggling with fatherhood;
• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men;
• men from culturally and linguistically diverse communities; and
• other marginalised men, such as gay men, isolated men or men with disabilities.

The Government also said it wanted to develop the policy in consultation with state and territory governments, health service providers, consumer and advocacy groups and Australian men.

The challenge for the Department has been to develop the policy and manage the consultation process in a way that takes account of the varying needs of Australian men and ensures the policy reflects the Government’s intention in making a commitment to the policy, as well as the views of Australian men and the range of health experts and stakeholder groups with an interest in the health and well being of
Australian men. Consultative goals of this breadth can present a variety of challenges. This paper provides an opportunity to present the need for a National Men’s Health Policy as well as some of the consultation mechanisms that the Department is using to inform the Policy and how this applies to the health of Australian men.

The consultation process for the policy was planned over several stages. In the first stage, the Minister for Health and Ageing, the Hon Nicola Roxon MP launched the National Men’s Health Policy on 8 June 2008, with the release of the paper *Developing a men’s health policy for Australia: Setting the scene*. This paper outlined some of the health differences between men and women, and suggested the men’s policy be developed around four foundational principles:

1. Gender equity
2. A focus on prevention
3. A strong and emerging evidence base
4. An action plan to address need across the life course.

The second stage of the consultation process was the implementation of a variety of awareness raising activities. This stage was designed to promote a better use of existing resources as well as to draw more attention to preventable health conditions.

A major component of this stage was the development of a men’s health policy website. This was established to assist those interested in men’s health and the National Men’s Health Policy to learn more about the state of Australia’s men’s health and to give their comments and thoughts on the policy development.

An additional component of the awareness raising stage was the release of “Developing a Men’s Health Policy for Australia—Resource Kit”. This kit, released by the Minister Roxon on 25 November 2008, includes a number of resources that can assist local men’s groups, MPs and other run their own men’s health awareness raising sessions. This kit has been sent out to hundreds of individuals and organisations and contains a number of components that provide information on men’s health, a presentation that can be used in community forums, and a policy feedback form.

The feedback form was specifically designed in recognition of the fact that approximately one third of the population (over 6 million people) live in regional and remote areas and while the Department has held forums in regional and rural centres, the kits provide an opportunity for those who can not easily attend the forums to submit their ideas, experiences, and concerns to the development of the policy.

The final aspect of the awareness raising campaign is the series of state and territory consultative forums that are being held in every regional city as well as regional centres across Australia. These forums are spearheaded by an appointed number of men’s health ambassadors. The consultation forums began in earnest on 16 February 2009 with a forum in Canberra. These will come to an end mid-year.

The information gathered from the consultations will be used to develop the draft of the policy which will then be released back to the public for comment. The policy is due for finalisation in 2009.