

## Submission to Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

### Introduction

The Australian Health Promotion Association Ltd (AHPA®) is the peak body for health promotion in Australia representing over 1000 members and subscribers. AHPA advocates for the development of healthy living, working and recreational environments for all people. Through our work we support the participation of communities and groups in decisions that affect their health.

Australia is one of the healthiest countries in the world. This is largely because of effective public health and its core services – protection, prevention and health promotion which includes action to create and support the social and environmental conditions that enable Australians to enjoy a healthy and happy life. **Health promotion's role has never been more significant.** Further details about our vision for a healthy, equitable Australia can be found in AHPA's [Health Promotion and Illness Prevention Policy](#).

Given the Inquiry's 3-page restriction on submissions we are unable to provide substantive comment and evidence on all health promotion related issues that have affected the health and well-being of the Australian population as a result of the Commonwealth government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic since its initial occurrence, during the emergency phase, and presently as it continues.

This submission is focused on the challenges occurring and continuing to occur in relation to public health messaging and communication. We welcome the opportunity to provide these comments and recommendations and request that if the committee chooses to hold in person or online events were hearings that we participate in that process to discuss our submission contents and other related issues.

### The Infodemic

The determinants of health and wellbeing and inequities in health include socio-economic, cultural, commercial, political, ecological, working and environmental conditions.<sup>1, 2</sup>

An infodemic has been defined as 'an overabundance of information, accurate or not, in the digital and physical space, accompanying an acute health event such as an outbreak or epidemic'.<sup>3</sup> The infodemic and the impact of misinformation and disinformation (mis/disinformation) has emerged as a significant public health issue impacting the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency response. Mis/disinformation also impacts other health issues including non-communicable diseases,<sup>4</sup> climate change,<sup>5</sup> vaccine hesitancy,<sup>6</sup> and cancer,<sup>7</sup> among many others. Global Health Professor Ilona Kickbusch has described the infodemic as a "major determinant of health".<sup>8</sup>

Addressing these interconnected determinants of health requires a multi-sector and whole-of-system response. Strong leadership and governance are required by governments at all levels and responses must engage communities, the public, non-government organisations, universities and research institute.<sup>9</sup> The private and commercial sector must also be engaged but vested interests and influence in policymaking must be made transparent and limited.

There is evidence that vulnerable populations are more likely to be targeted by, and impacted by mis/disinformation and this has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>10, 11, 12</sup> In Australia, people with lower education levels, English as a second language, lower digital and health literacy levels, and lower trust in government and authorities are more susceptible to mis/disinformation.<sup>12</sup> The cost of mis/disinformation has been quantified by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security to an estimated \$US50-\$US300 million a day,<sup>13</sup> while a 2023 report by the Canadian Expert Panel on the Socioeconomic Impacts of Science and Health Misinformation estimated misinformation cost the health system \$300 million in a 9 month period, and contributed to 2,800 deaths and 13,000 hospitalisations.<sup>14</sup>

### **A Comprehensive Public Health Response**

Effective health promotion and illness prevention requires multiple complementary evidence-informed strategies. These include health promoting policies (such as strengthened legislation, regulatory, and fiscal measures), the creation of health promoting environments, community engagement and action, support to empower people to increase awareness and control over their health and ensuring person-centred health.<sup>15 16</sup>

Similarly, the infodemic needs a comprehensive response, of which moderation of online mis/disinformation is an important part. However, from a preventive focus, there is an urgent need to increase digital and health literacy across the board, and in particular with vulnerable populations.<sup>17</sup> A comprehensive approach to addressing the public health challenges posed by mis/disinformation could be based around the five key action areas of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion.<sup>15</sup> We propose the following actions and activities as an example of what such a comprehensive response to the infodemic may include:

#### **Building healthy public policy**

- Integrate infodemic management into workforce capacity and policy.
- Provide flexibility in the health system to coordinate response and surge capacity.
- Regulations on mis/disinformation.
- Ensure policy makers are aware of the consequences of non-action on mis/disinformation.

#### **Creating supportive environments**

- Focus on the wider system people live in (determinants of health).
- Create supportive information environments that help guide people towards good and appropriate information to enable good decision making.
- Make it easy for people to engage in the process and feel empowered to create change - hotlines for reporting rumours for example, buttons to alert social media companies to flag misinformation.

#### **Strengthening community action**

- Create and maintain relationships of trust and solidarity between community, family, health system and authorities.
- Create culturally safe and appropriate approaches through comprehensive and sustained community engagement.
- Empower people to take control of their own health and decisions, by taking an equitable approach.
- Develop community resources for infodemic management.

### **Developing personal skills**

- Promote digital literacy, health literacy, inoculation and prebunking initiatives.
- Work with partners to develop and deploy strategies across the life-course.
- Ensure an equitable approach targeting those most at risk and tailoring interventions appropriately and with community.

### **Reorienting health services**

- Increasing research capacity and funding on these issues as a priority.
- Identify data sources and create systems to share data.
- Develop ethical frameworks.
- Develop integrated social listening programs building on existing sources.
- Allocate or increase funding to new or existing health promotion communication services.
- Reorient to integrating infodemic management into preparedness, as well as emergency activities.
- Build workforce and community capacity and deployment pathways.

Identifying and addressing mis/disinformation is important, but any long term, sustainable strategy also needs to understand and address the drivers and determinants if substantive change is a goal. Mis/disinformation thrives when information voids are not answered ie when people have questions and they cannot find the answers in rapid, accessible and appropriate formats. The Commonwealth government needs to increase the quality and accessibility of information, work with community and community leaders to develop appropriate pathways, build trust, and develop social listening systems to ensure early identification of concerns and questions.<sup>18</sup> In this manner, by taking a holistic approach it is possible to build community resilience so that when people see mis/disinformation they recognise it and can evaluate it and dismiss it themselves.

### **Recommendations**

1. The Commonwealth government engage with peak health promotion and public health organisations to develop an infodemic management framework addressing public health mis/disinformation, including its integration into pandemic preparedness and response mechanisms.
2. The Commonwealth government invest in the development, implementation, and evaluation of community resources for infodemic management relating to public health related issues.
3. The Commonwealth government increase its investment in infodemic research as a priority.

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15 December 2023

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### **References**

Provided in Appendix 1.