

Australian Unity's Submission:

Australia: The Healthiest Country by 2020

*Australian Unity's Response to the Discussion Paper prepared
by
The National Preventative Health Taskforce*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australian Unity Limited is a national health, financial services and retirement living organisation with more than 400,000 customers, including 185,000 members and more than 1,200 employees. We operate the sixth largest private health insurance fund in Australia and provide cover for more than 300,000 people.

Australian Unity supports the aims and recommended targets outlined in this discussion paper. We agree that no one sector alone can deal with the prevention agenda. Private healthcare funds provide benefits to about 44 percent of the Australian population. For Australia to be a truly healthy nation by 2020 all sectors involved in healthcare must work together.

Australian Unity notes the significant achievements of both State and Federal governments in the healthcare sector and draws attention to the following:

Stronger co-ordination between the public and private sectors

There is currently little coordination between the public and private sectors to achieve the common goal of reducing the health and economic burden of obesity, alcohol and tobacco.

The different tiers of government – federal, state and local – sometimes mean that we have different guidelines and regulations. For it to be successful, the National Prevention Agency must have clear objectives and have a strong mandate to ensure implementation. It should also work with key leaders including the private sector to use the body of knowledge and experience of companies such as Australian Unity.

A National Prevention Agency would not only bring together expertise across relevant areas but it would also develop standards that can be applied across the country.

Partnership between the public and private sectors

Australian Unity can offer the public health system its experience in promoting positive lifestyle change for improved health outcomes; wide geographical and age reach; infrastructure and frequency of contact with over 300,000 Australians.

We are, therefore, well positioned to work in partnership with the public sector to develop mechanisms to distribute and promote consistent preventative health information, and to facilitate a call to action for our members and the broader community.

Behavioural change is our biggest challenge

Australian Unity surveys confirm that behavioural change is our biggest challenge. A reasonable level of health literacy often does not translate into action. We are aware that an individual's readiness for behavioural change impacts on their ability to translate information into action and sustainable lifestyle improvements. Australian Unity is investigating and trialing different methods of delivering programs, benefits and information to members at different stages of readiness for change.

Private health funds investment in preventative health

Australian Unity has invested extensively in member education and communication initiatives, and preventative healthcare programs.

Until March 2007, the role of health funds was largely restricted to paying bills associated with hospital admissions. Opportunities for preventative health and chronic disease management were limited until the Broader Health Cover legislation was introduced, giving insurers the opportunity to pay for services that prevent or substitute for hospital admission. Australian Unity was an active contributor to the Federal Government's consultation on private health reform. The new rules provided us with the opportunity to support smarter and better ways of preventing health problems or getting members back to health.

Private sector support for workplace health

Australian Unity has been recognised for its efforts in promoting workplace health by WorkHealth in Victoria. We continue to invest in our employees' health and wellbeing and we welcome the Discussion Paper's proposal to review the taxation system to provide tax breaks for fitness related products, recreational activities and healthy foods for workplaces.

Conclusion

As a wellbeing company we recognise that we have a role to play in assisting our members and employees to manage their health and therefore, the health of the fund. Our member sampling demonstrates that members see their insurer as a source of credible health information and programs, and understand why preventative health is a mutually beneficial outcome.

We welcome the opportunity to be part of the solution in developing an integrated, sustainable, cost-effective preventative health system for all Australians.

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1. Background

1.1 Australian Unity

Australian Unity Limited is a national health, financial services and retirement living organisation with more than 400,000 customers, including 185,000 members and more than 1,200 employees.

Australian Unity operates the sixth largest private health insurance (PHI) fund in Australia and provides cover for more than 300,000 people. We also own and operate GU Health, a corporate health fund that provides tailored health plans to some of Australia's leading corporations, and three dental clinics in South Melbourne, the Melbourne CBD and Box Hill.

Collectively, healthcare funds provide benefits to about 44 percent of the Australian population.

At Australian Unity, the wellbeing of our members is at 'the heart of everything we do'. This is the key premise underpinning our wellness philosophy and our brand positioning for all companies within the Australian Unity group of businesses.

We strive to help members stay healthy and assist those who are unwell to get better as quickly as possible and our healthcare products and services were developed with this principle in mind.

1.2 Support for recommendations

Australian Unity supports the aims outlined in this discussion paper and has in principle support for the suggested actions outlined for each of the main focus issues of obesity, alcohol and tobacco. Australian Unity also supports the recommended targets.

1.3 Stronger co-ordination between the public and private sectors

Australian Unity notes the significant achievements of both State and Federal governments to date with major public health campaigns such as drink driving and immunisation. The success was based on a multi-faceted approach with involvement from various sectors providing different perspectives that helped ensure legislation, education, compliance and infrastructure issues were simultaneously addressed. The same degree of effort is required to design and implement interventions that can prevent chronic illnesses.

There is currently little coordination between the public and private sectors to achieve the common goal of reducing the public health and economic burden of obesity, alcohol and tobacco.

Therefore, a National Prevention Agency would ensure leadership and coordination of a health prevention strategy and its implementation, monitoring and evaluation across a broad range of sectors.

The different tiers of government – federal, state and local – sometimes mean that we have different guidelines and regulations. For it to be successful, the National Prevention Agency must have clear objectives and have a strong mandate to ensure implementation. It should also work with key leaders including the private sector to use the body of knowledge and experience of companies such as Australian Unity. A National Prevention Agency would not only bring together expertise across relevant areas but it would also develop standards that can be applied across the country.

1.4 Partnership between the public and private sectors

The government - federal, state and local - generally provides preventative health messages through one way communication channels such as the mass media, or as outlined in the Discussion Paper, through a legislative or regulatory positioning.

Hospitals and treating practitioners tend to provide preventative health messages on a one to one basis as part of the treatment. Further dissemination of information is either limited or does not occur.

Australian Unity is in a unique position to be able to educate and influence its member base. We have regular one way communication to members but now also

host interactive channels that collect member health statistics, tailor health information responses and monitor behavioural change.

Australian Unity can offer the public health system its experience in promoting positive lifestyle change for improved health outcomes; wide geographical and age reach; infrastructure and frequency of contact with over 300,000 Australians.

We are, therefore, well positioned to work in partnership with the public sector to develop mechanisms to distribute and promote consistent preventative health information, and to facilitate a call to action for our members and the broader community.

1.5 Behavioural change is our biggest challenge

Behavioural change is our biggest challenge. People with private health funds receive comprehensive information and education and it is generally expected that a reasonable level of health literacy should translate into action. In fact, our surveys and health service usage data confirm that our members have lifestyle related health conditions, including misuse of alcohol, smoking and obesity that are similar to the broader population.

We have also identified that an individual's readiness for behavioural change impacts on their ability to translate information into action and sustainable lifestyle improvements. Australian Unity is investigating and trialing different methods of delivering programs, benefits and information to members at different stages of readiness for change.

2. What we are doing

Australian Unity has invested extensively in member education and communication initiatives, preventative healthcare programs, and the promotion of a healthy workplace for healthy employees.

2.1 Education and communication

Education and communication is a key part of how Australian Unity conducts its business with our members. We regularly communicate health messages to members through the *Wellplan* magazine, which includes expert medical advice and practical tips for making healthy lifestyle choices.

Our members also have access to *Wellplan Online*, which provides interactive health workbooks, the opportunity to undertake detailed health risk assessments, personalised emailed newsletters and a detailed medical encyclopaedia.

The information we disseminate supports our members to make decisions that promote a healthier lifestyle. We also recognise that our members often influence family and friends when they share our health messages.

2.2 Our products

Our existing healthcare products offer a broad range of benefits for preventative health services, including preventative oral health procedures, orthotics, quit smoking and weight loss programs, doctor health checks and screening procedures provided in hospital such as colonoscopies.

The introduction of the broader health legislation in 2007 provided a mandate to build on traditional member offerings and we will be increasing our preventative health benefits in 2009 for quit smoking and weight loss programs and introducing a range of new benefits including Exercise Physiology, Health Coaching, "Step Into Life" exercise programs, rebate for Diabetes Australia membership, diabetes disease management through "Lift for Life" and a cervical cancer vaccination benefit for women not eligible for the national vaccination program. We hope that these additional incentives will encourage and motivate members to translate knowledge into action.

Australian Unity also offers a range of comprehensive wellness programs designed to increase member self-efficacy in the management of their chronic health conditions and reduce the need for secondary hospital admissions. These programs are important in addressing the outcomes of obesity, alcohol misuse and smoking. The programs are phone based, and aim to educate and empower individuals, and encourage positive lifestyle choices, adherence to best practice medication use, and open dialogue with treating practitioners.

2.3 Workplace health

At Australian Unity, we also invest in the health of our staff by offering a wide range of programs that promote workplace wellbeing. These include the establishment of an active@work group which organises physical activity for our staff on a regular basis like subsidised yoga and pilates classes, fruit boxes supplied to staff twice a week, free employee flu vaccinations, free employee skin checks and a subsidised cafeteria which provides healthy food.

Australian Unity has been recognised for its efforts in promoting workplace health by WorkHealth in Victoria. We continue to invest in our employees' health and wellbeing and we welcome the Discussion Paper's proposal to review the taxation system to provide tax breaks for fitness related products, recreational activities and healthy foods for workplaces.

3. Conclusion

Australian Unity endorses the measures the government is proposing to build Australia into the healthiest country by 2020. Preventative health is an integral part of the way we do business and we support the view that no one sector alone is responsible for the prevention agenda.

Until March 2007, the role of health funds was largely restricted to paying bills associated with hospital admissions. Opportunities for preventative health and chronic disease management were limited until the Broader Health Cover legislation

was introduced, giving insurers the opportunity to pay for services that prevent or substitute for hospital admission. Australian Unity was an active contributor to the Federal Government's consultation on private health reform. The new rules provided us with the opportunity to support smarter and better ways of preventing health problems or getting members back to health.

As a wellbeing company we recognise that we have a role to play in assisting our members to manage their health and therefore, the health of the fund. Our member sampling demonstrates that members see their insurer as a source of credible health information and programs, and understand why preventative health is a mutually beneficial outcome.

We welcome the opportunity to be part of the solution in developing an integrated, sustainable, cost-effective preventative health system for all Australians.