

2025: A year of uncertainty and opportunity for public health

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Editorial:

As we enter 2025, it is clear it will be a year that presents considerable challenges to public health. The burden of chronic disease¹ on communities and our health systems persists. While Australia and New Zealand have yet to record a human case, the H5 avian influenza continues to spread internationally,² including in the U.S., which has recorded its first associated death.³ Furthermore, the World Meteorological Organization⁴ reported global temperatures in 2024 were the hottest on record, exceeding global ambitions outlined in the Paris Agreement to limit increases to 1.5 degrees celsius above pre-industrial levels. As a result, health and climate-related disasters, such as bushfires experienced in Australia in 2019-20 and currently being experienced in California will be more likely.

The year has also begun with a rapid and disorienting pace of change in the global health apparatus. U.S. leadership in many areas of global health and research is uncertain, with its withdrawal from global health institutions, including the World Health Organization (WHO), its current pause on National Institutes of Health administered research grants, and the proposed appointment of Robert F Kennedy Jr as U.S Health Secretary, whose publicly stated views on a range of public health policies have been criticised as inconsistent with prevailing evidence.^{5,6} Recent changes across major social media platforms, including the removal of fact-checking processes, may exacerbate misinformation and complicate efforts to address emerging global health threats or emergencies.⁷ Advances in AI and other technologies also continue to accelerate, and their impacts on health and well-being are difficult to forecast.

The change in government in New Zealand in 2024 has seen a shift in a range of health policies.⁸ In Australia, the outcome of the looming federal election will significantly influence the direction of key reforms in public health. The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is seeking responses from the major parties on our election priorities,⁹ including the creation of the Australian Centre for Disease Control (ACDC). Such entities provide important infrastructure to better coordinate infectious disease efforts and, hopefully, in the not-too-distant future, non-communicable disease efforts. Currently, there is

no public commitment from the Liberal or National Parties to support the establishment of the ACDC. Ongoing reforms in the education sector and major research funding schemes are also needed to ensure we train and support public health practitioners and researchers undertaking work to address priority health issues for our region. There have also been calls to establish more transparent, reliable and accountable funding mechanisms to strengthen the public health system.¹⁰

In the face of such uncertainty, the community looks to the public health and research workforce for stewardship. Australia (5th) and New Zealand (9th) are ranked among the top 10 countries internationally in community trust in scientists,¹¹ who are considered crucial to solving Australia's biggest challenges.¹² Australia and New Zealand have a reputation for global public health leadership and making valued contributions to the public health evidence-base. In 2025, such leadership will be paramount. For example, how global institutions such as WHO respond to changes in its membership and likely significant reductions in its funding from the U.S. remains to be seen. However, such disruptions, both internationally and at home present opportunities for reform to better serve public health. As a current member of a range of international agencies, including the WHO Executive Board,¹³ Australia is well-placed to help guide improvements in global health. Mobilising communities, non-government organisations, and professional societies within the public health sector will help to ensure public health is advanced in Australia and New Zealand.

We also recognise the important role that the ANZJPH plays in ensuring and building trust in science and facilitating public health. We are committed to upholding the integrity of the scientific process, including quality peer review, and to prioritising the publication of high-quality research aligned with public health priorities. A trusted source of evidence for policy and practice decision-making is one of our core objectives. While our improvement processes will be ongoing, we have outlined initiatives we will be undertaking in 2025¹⁴ and will inform the readership of changes to the editorial process to achieve this end. As the theme of our Preventive Health Conference in 2025 reminds us, "Prevention is Political". High quality evidence should be at the

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forefront of influencing public health-relevant political decisions that are so central to the current and future health of the community in Australia and New Zealand.

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