CREATING SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

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The next step was to examine guidelines and standards for highlighted vast differences in the quality of paths. For one of these the Macquarie Area Health Service was commissioned to analyse the factors that affect the adequacy of footpaths, walkways and cycleways - referred to collectively as "paths" in the rest of this article - and to develop a simple checklist to audit them.

RATIONALE
Because physical inactivity is common in NSW (in 1994, 49 per cent of the population failed to attain adequate physical activity and 12 per cent were sedentary according to NSW Health Department definitions), it makes sense for a physical activity program to target the entire population.

Healthy activities which can be included in daily life are likely to be activities that also fulfill other functions. For example, walking to work has a transport function. The ideal physical environment would, therefore, be one that made it easier, safer and more enjoyable to be physically active as part of everyday life.

Recent research documents environmental barriers to participating in physical activity, such as fears for personal safety and problems with footpaths. To facilitate walking and cycling as legitimate forms of transport, it is important to have adequate paths, and also secure bike lockups, showers at work and frequent public transport.

METHODS
Local governments are in charge of planning, regulating and constructing both paths and open space, and therefore the case study commenced by consulting councils' footpath and bike strategies, and visiting a number of sites. This highlighted vast differences in the quality of paths.

The next step was to examine guidelines and standards for paths. These standards have been written from engineering and town planning perspectives and are best understood if read in partnership with planning experts, who can be found in councils and in the Roads and Traffic Authority. A town planning consultant was engaged to facilitate this process and to help us develop tools that would be useful to health workers, council workers, school teachers and residents.

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