

# MONITORING CHILD HEALTH IN NSW: THE NEW SOUTH WALES CHILD HEALTH SURVEY 2001 AND BEYOND

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This article describes the recently-released report of the *New South Wales Child Health Survey 2001*,<sup>1</sup> which provides the first ever snapshot of the health and wellbeing of children aged 0–12 years in NSW. The survey provides a wealth of information to support planning, implementation, and evaluation of health services and programs for children and their families in NSW. The report of the survey, the survey dataset, and the Continuous Health Survey Program (HSP), are all part of the NSW Department of Health's commitment to monitor child health and to address many of the gaps in child health information in NSW.<sup>2,3</sup> The survey report has been produced as a *NSW Public Health Bulletin* supplement (Volume 13, Number S-3). The survey dataset is available for more in-depth analysis.

## ABOUT THE NEW SOUTH WALES CHILD HEALTH SURVEY 2001

In 2001, the NSW Department of Health, in conjunction with the area health services and the NSW Commission for Children and Young People, conducted a survey of the health of children, using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). The aim of the survey was to provide baseline data on the health and wellbeing of children aged 0–12 years in NSW, and to support the implementation of the NSW Government's *Families First* initiative and other child health initiatives.<sup>4</sup>

The survey content was developed through consultation with the area health services, relevant government agencies, and a range of experts.<sup>5</sup> Table 1 lists the topics covered by the questionnaire, which was translated into Arabic, Chinese, and Vietnamese.

Interviews were carried out between March and September 2001. The target sample for the survey comprised 500 children from each of the 17 area health services. Households were sampled using list-assisted random digit dialling. One eligible child was randomly selected from each household and that child's main carer was interviewed. The overall response rate was 84.1 per cent. Most survey respondents (84.3 per cent) were mothers. Information was collected on a total of 9425 children.

## KEY FINDINGS OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES CHILD HEALTH SURVEY 2001

The report of the survey provides descriptive information on the major issues covered by the survey, with breakdowns by child age and sex, area health service of residence, and other demographic factors where appropriate.

The survey results indicate that NSW families with children are reasonably well-connected through community and school networks, and that a high proportion of children aged three to five years are attending either pre-school, long day-care, or other formal care, as recommended in the *Families First* initiative for all children before they start school.<sup>4</sup>

The survey shows that although most women initially breastfeed, as recommended in the Australian dietary guidelines,<sup>6</sup> the majority of mothers cease to breastfeed between four and six months, and only a minority continue breastfeeding to 12 months as recommended.<sup>6</sup> Also, only slightly more than half of the parents were placing their infants to sleep on their backs, which is the recommended sleeping position to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.<sup>7</sup>

**TABLE 1**

### TOPICS COVERED BY THE NEW SOUTH WALES CHILD HEALTH SURVEY 2001 QUESTIONNAIRE

The New South Wales Child health Survey questionnaire included questions on:

- family functioning
- social support
- social capital
- childhood activities
- childcare
- preschool and school attendance
- smoking in pregnancy
- smoking in the home
- parental smoking messages
- infant sleeping position
- maternal folate
- breastfeeding
- nutrition
- food security and hunger
- sun protection
- water safety
- physical activity and inactivity
- asthma
- oral health
- disability
- emotional and behavioural problems
- infant feeding and behavioural problems
- physical health of toddlers
- use of health services
- immunisation
- visits to general practitioners
- personal health records
- child and family health services
- parental support services
- health services received in the home (home visiting).

The survey also indicates that few children are meeting the recommended vegetable intake;<sup>6</sup> a considerable proportion of the recommended daily fruit intake is being met through consumption of fruit juices, rather than fresh fruit;<sup>6</sup> and the public health message about protecting children from ultraviolet radiation is mainly being applied to children under five years of age.<sup>8</sup>

The survey also shows that a high proportion of children under five years of age have never visited a dentist for a check-up, as recommended;<sup>9</sup> and that most children under five years of age have used child and family services but a minority are currently using the services. About half of the families with children under five years of age have received health services in the home (a 'home visit') by a health worker or volunteer to provide assistance or advice with the care of their child. This proportion is expected to increase with the introduction of universal home visiting through the *Families First* initiative.<sup>4</sup>

### MONITORING CHILD HEALTH 2002 ONWARDS

Areas for ongoing monitoring of child health and wellbeing, as a component of the continuous Health Survey Program, include: asthma; breastfeeding; childcare, preschool and school attendance; use of personal health records; diabetes; environmental tobacco smoke; folate and pregnancy; family functioning and parental support; health status and disability; health service access, use and satisfaction; access and attitudes to childhood immunisation; injury; mental health; nutrition; oral health; physical activity; sight hearing and speech; social capital and sun protection. Child-specific reports will be produced every two years, with the first of these due out in 2005.

The *New South Wales Child Health Survey 2001* available either from the Better Health Centre by phone (02) 9816 0452, or from the Public Health website at [www.health.nsw.gov.au/public-health/phb/phb.html](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/public-health/phb/phb.html). Requests to use the survey dataset for further analysis should be directed through the Chief Health Officer. Further information can be obtained from Margo Eyeson-Annan by email at [meyes@doh.health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:meyes@doh.health.nsw.gov.au) or by phone at (02) 9424 5759.

### REFERENCES

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