

3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2001, the NSW Department of Health, in conjunction with the NSW 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, to inform health policy and planning.

The survey content was developed by the Child Health Survey Technical Expert Group (CHSTEG) in consultation with area health services, other government departments, and a range of experts. The questionnaire 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.

Social determinants of health

The health and wellbeing of children is strongly influenced by social and family circumstances. To explore these determinants of health, the *New South Wales Child Health Survey 2001* included measures of family functioning, social support, and social capital; and childhood activities and attendance at childcare, preschool, and school.

The survey showed that NSW families with children aged 0–12 years have high levels of healthy family functioning. Most parents reported that they had friends who make them feel safe, secure and happy; had people they could count on in an emergency; could get help from a neighbour to care for a child; and had attended a local community event in the past year.

Children aged 4–12 years were reported to participate in a wide range of activities including organised sport, bike riding, playing video games, and playing with toys. Approximately half of all children aged 0–5 years were reported to have attended childcare and most children over three years of age were currently attending preschool, other regular early childhood programs, or school.

Health behaviours

Health behaviours of parents and children are important not only because they shape health behaviours in later life but also because the beginnings of many chronic diseases occur before birth and in childhood. Health behaviours measured in the *New South Wales Child*

Health Survey 2001 included smoking during pregnancy, smoking in the home, infant sleeping position, maternal folate, breastfeeding, nutrition, food security and hunger, sun protection, water safety, and physical activity and inactivity.

One in seven mothers of babies aged less than 12 months reported smoking during pregnancy. Just under two-thirds reported placing their baby on its back to sleep, the preferred sleeping position for the prevention of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Over half of all mothers were aware that taking additional folate prior to and during pregnancy reduced the risk of neural tube defects. Nearly ninety per cent of mothers of babies aged less than two years reported that their infant had been breastfed. However, almost 40 per cent of babies were breastfed for less than three months.

Almost all children aged 2–12 years were reported to consume the recommended daily minimum quantity of fruits (including fruit juice), but less than one in seven children were reported to consume the recommended daily minimum quantity of vegetables. Almost 90 per cent were reported to drink one or more cups of milk per day. Overall, six per cent of respondents reported that they had run out of food and could not afford to buy more, on at least one occasion, in the previous 12 months.

More than 90 per cent of children aged 5–12 years were reported to have participated in sports or outdoor activities in the last 12 months, and nearly 40 per cent were reported to watch an average of over two hours of television each day. When out in the sun for 15 minutes or more in the previous summer, more than 70 per cent of children aged 1–12 years were reported to have often or always used sunscreen, with similar proportions reporting wearing protective clothing.

Two-thirds of parents or carers of children aged 0–12 years reported that no one living in their household smoked and a further one-quarter reported that smokers living in the household usually or always smoked outside the house.

Health status

Although NSW children are generally healthy, physical, emotional, and behavioural problems can affect the ability of both children and their carers to participate in everyday activities and to enjoy life. The *New South Wales Child Health Survey 2001* collected information about asthma, oral health, disability, emotional and behavioural problems, nutrition, and physical development.

Approximately one-quarter of parents or carers reported ever being told by a doctor or at a hospital that their child had asthma. Nearly 16 per cent of children were reported to have current asthma, and less than half of children with

current asthma were reported to have a written asthma management plan from their doctor.

Just over half of all children aged 5–12 years were reported to have had a dental assessment at school as part of the Save Our Kids Smiles (SOKS) program in the last 12 months, and 43 per cent of children aged 1–12 years reported visiting a dental professional (excluding SOKS) in the last 12 months. More than 90 per cent of children aged 2–12 years were reported to have normal vision and more than 80 per cent were reported to have no speech difficulties, while one in 30 children was reported to have any form of hearing loss.

Overall, almost one-third of children aged 4–12 years were reported to have had any emotional or behavioural problems in the past six months. More than one-quarter of infants aged 0–1 years were reported to have feeding problems (most commonly problems with breastfeeding and reflux) and one-third were reported to have a behavioural problem (most commonly with settling to sleep). Less than one in 10 toddlers aged 1–4 years were reported to have problems with eating, feeding, mobility, or other aspects of physical development.

Health services

The *New South Wales Child Health Survey 2001* collected information on use of health services, including immunisation, general practitioners, the use of personal health records, child and family health services, parental support services, and home visiting (health services received in the home).

More than 90 per cent of parents or carers of children aged 0–4 years reported they had attended child and family health services, but only 29 per cent were currently using these services. More than 90 per cent of parents or carers of children aged 0–12 years reported their child had a personal health record, with three-quarters of children aged 0–4 years and one-quarter of children aged 5–12 years currently using the personal health record (mainly to record immunisation and growth).

Just over two-thirds of parents or carers stated that they needed parental support services, but 19 per cent of these did not access such services. Just over one-third of parents or carers of children aged 0–4 years reported they had received a visit in their home from a nurse or volunteer to provide support or advice in caring for their child.