

# REVIEW OF THE NSW PUBLIC HEALTH *BULLETIN*: A QUALITATIVE SURVEY OF STAKEHOLDERS

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## ABSTRACT

In 2005, the NSW Department of Health commissioned an external review of the *NSW Public Health Bulletin*. This article describes the methods and findings of the qualitative survey. Participants included people working in population health from within the Department of Health, area health services, the tertiary sector and non-government organisations. There were fifty interviews, two focus groups and eight written surveys. The review found substantial support and respect for the *Bulletin*. It described the features of the *Bulletin* that stakeholders valued and provided suggestions to strengthen the publication. These findings will guide developments in the *Bulletin*'s purpose, presentation, content and distribution for its readership.

The *NSW Public Health Bulletin* has been in continuous circulation since May 1990, when it was established to disseminate information to the newly developed public health infrastructure in NSW and provide feedback to practitioners on notifiable conditions, in particular communicable diseases. Free access is provided to the electronic version and it is also distributed free as a print journal. In 2005, the NSW Department of Health commissioned an external review to assess whether the *Bulletin* is fulfilling its role as a relevant tool for the public health workforce in NSW.

There were two parts to the review: firstly, a qualitative survey of a sample of the *Bulletin*'s stakeholders and secondly, a quantitative survey to describe the current distribution of the printed *Bulletin*. The findings were to guide developments in the role, presentation, content and distribution of the *Bulletin*. This article describes the method and findings of the qualitative survey of users and provides feedback to the readership about the review.

## METHODS

The review was undertaken between May and July 2005. An Advisory Group with representation from the NSW Department of Health, rural and metropolitan area health services, and an external research centre was established to provide oversight. Review questions were established to gather information about: the *Bulletin*'s purpose and unique contribution; the extent to which it reflects changes in public health practice; its content; the frequency of distribution; and its future directions. A purposeful sample of participants was drawn from the NSW Health

Department, people working in population health structures in the area health services, the tertiary sector, peak bodies for general practice, and non-government organisations. In addition, the views of authors, reviewers, guest editors and members of the *Bulletin*'s Editorial Advisory Committee were sought. Approximately 50 people contributed to the qualitative review through face-to-face or telephone interviews. Three site visits to area health services were undertaken—in Newcastle, Parramatta and Tamworth—with interviewees drawn from internal and external subscribers from local *Bulletin* distribution lists. Prior to their interviews, all participants were provided with written information about the review, including a summary of the proposed questions and discussion areas. Questions were used as a guide and areas of discussion were tailored to the person's experience of the *Bulletin*.

As well as undertaking individual interviews, the consultant attended two meetings with management to seek input to the review: one was with the Directors of Public Health, who are responsible for the distribution of the *Bulletin* within their area health services, and the other with managers from the Centre for Epidemiology and Research within the NSW Department of Health, which is responsible for the production of the *Bulletin*. A small indicative sample of eight current and previous trainees from the NSW Public Health Officer Training Program and the NSW Biostatistical Officer Training Program provided responses by email to the interview questions.

The information gathered was analysed to identify themes in relation to each review question. Draft and final reports outlining overall findings, findings specific to the review questions, and recommendations, were developed and presented to the Advisory Group.<sup>1</sup>

## RESULTS

The review found substantial support and respect for the *Bulletin*, especially amongst stakeholders within NSW Health, who expressed a strong sense of 'ownership' for the *Bulletin*. The *Bulletin* was regarded as making a unique contribution amongst health publications, and users valued its focus on the practice of public health in NSW. They also valued the eclectic nature of the content and its balance of contributions from both established and new authors.

For NSW Health employees, the *Bulletin* was seen as affirming the public health endeavours of the workforce. It was regarded as drawing together and connecting the public health workforce, reducing feelings of isolation and helping workers to feel part of a broader public health community. It increased understanding of the bigger picture of public health and of how parts of the system fitted together. Indeed, some contributors felt that this role

could be strengthened.

The *Bulletin* was considered to be a significant source of information for many workers and a primary tool for public health communication in NSW. Respondents believed that the *Bulletin* continued to provide content that was of interest to a broad range of public health professionals and that it was the eclectic nature of its articles that made this possible. Many respondents reported that the *Bulletin* had directly influenced and/or supported their practice in public health, and they provided examples to the review.

The special issues of the *Bulletin* (issues that deal with specific themes or topics), the surveillance information and the Fact Sheets were particularly valued. The special issues were valued because they provided a snap shot of a particular area. They provided an in depth examination of the subject while helping readers to sift through a range of perspectives and, as a result, they provided both a holistic picture of the area and an overview of the contemporary thinking related to it. Fact Sheets were popular and seen to have practical relevance. Respondents felt that the surveillance data and the reporting of trends in communicable diseases should be retained as it provides a historical record for communicable diseases in NSW.

People liked the size, quality and academic rigour of the content and the fact that it was easy to read. The size of the *Bulletin*, its use of plain English and the succinct nature of the articles were all considered unique and of significant value. Respondents also valued it being free and highly accessible. People used the index but felt that it could be improved.

Indexing of the *Bulletin* by Medline was considered to be an important form of recognition and respondents felt that any decision about implementing changes to the *Bulletin* should take account of the requirements that are essential for inclusion in Medline.

Notwithstanding that the *Bulletin* had changed and developed over time, there remained concerns that it had not moved sufficiently beyond the 'old' notion of public health to reflect the breadth of issues implicit within a current population health approach. In addition, it was not considered to have done enough to keep the workforce informed about change and new directions in public health. The common themes in relation to proposed changes to content were a greater focus on Indigenous issues, on rural and migrant health issues and on chronic disease/conditions, including chronic disease surveillance, which, it was felt, should be regularly reported on.

The majority of those interviewed read the *Bulletin* in hard copy and appreciated the convenience of the portability of a hard copy. They used the electronic version to access articles in previous issues. Concerns were raised about the ease of navigation of the *Bulletin* site. Regarding universal access to the electronic version, contributors reported

problems with access to computers and to the Internet. Consequently, the printed copy remained important. However, many spontaneously commented on the need for a style makeover.

The experience of authors and guest editors in contributing to the *Bulletin* was largely positive. Of particular note was the valuable role that the *Bulletin* played in encouraging and supporting authors who had either not previously published or who had limited publishing experience. There was substantial positive regard for the efforts of the NSW Health staff involved in producing the *Bulletin*, including the support they provided to authors and guest editors. It was felt that the *Bulletin* would benefit from a strengthened Editorial Advisory Committee that took a more active role in forward planning and strategic thinking.

Contributors felt there was potential for the *Bulletin* to be more widely distributed, and to be accessed in a timelier manner through electronic distribution. There was interest in developing the electronic access to the *Bulletin* and readers sought email notification of issues, including a contents list with direct links to each article. The PDF format was preferred to the HTML format, but most would prefer access to the PDF of individual articles rather than the whole journal.

The most common concerns raised about the *Bulletin* were its lack of timeliness, the need for a distribution strategy, and that it was perceived to be more closely linked to the 'old' notion of public health than to the 'new'. Timely publication about subjects was considered to be a great advantage and contributors cited as examples the special issues on health and equity released in support of the NSW Health and Equity Statement; the Olympics issue; and the information on SARS. Problems relating to the distribution of the *Bulletin* included the need for an agreed distribution policy/strategy to improve access by the public health workforce.

Three themes emerged in relation to strengthening the *Bulletin*. The first relates to the *Bulletin's* potential to engage and communicate more with its readers. It was regarded as being somewhat distanced from its readership and it was felt it would be strengthened by developing strategies to generate dialogue with readers. The most common suggestions about how to achieve this were through the creation of an electronic *Bulletin* Board linked to the electronic version; the establishment of a regular 'Letter to the Editor' column; and the publication of more articles on the leading edge of public health to generate debate and discussion. The second suggestion for strengthening the *Bulletin* was to expand the focus on population health. Whilst there is general acknowledgement that the *Bulletin* has developed beyond its initial focus on surveillance and communicable diseases, there remains concern that the scope of its population health coverage is limited. The third suggestion was that the capacity of the

*Bulletin* be utilised more strategically to advance the aims of public health in NSW, for example by leading debate and discussion in relation to the more complex and emerging public health issues.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings of the review were positive and there was unanimous support for the *Bulletin's* continued publication. The review and its recommendations present an opportunity for further development of the *Bulletin* to ensure that it remains relevant and useful to the field.

The aim of the *Bulletin* is to publish population health data and peer-reviewed information to support public health action in NSW. As public health develops in NSW and the

structures through which it is delivered changes, so the *Bulletin* should change to ensure that it remains relevant and useful.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## REFERENCES

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# RESULTS FROM THE 2000 FAX-BACK SURVEY TO READERS ABOUT THE NSW PUBLIC HEALTH BULLETIN

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## ABSTRACT

Publications must regularly reflect on their performance to ensure that they remain relevant to their readership and are fulfilling their objectives. In 2000 the 'NSW Public Health Bulletin Discussion Paper 2000' was released, with recommendations regarding all aspects of the *Bulletin* content, distribution and editorial management. A copy was sent to 1200 people with a fax-back survey seeking general feedback on the *Bulletin* and the recommendations. There was a response rate of 11 per cent. The survey identified broad support for the *Bulletin* and the recommendations. Findings included strong support for encouraging electronic access but maintaining the distribution of the printed copy. Subsequent changes to production of the *Bulletin* have included expanding the number of reviewers of articles and making improvements to the website.

In 1990 the *NSW Public Health Bulletin* was established to disseminate information among the newly formed public health infrastructure of the NSW health system and to provide regular feedback to practitioners on notifiable conditions, in particular communicable diseases. It has been in continuous publication since then, providing readers with

free access to population health data and peer-reviewed information to support public health action in NSW.

The 'NSW Public Health Bulletin Discussion Paper 2000' was released in November 2000. It described the purpose of the *Bulletin* and the production process. It also recommended future directions in all aspects of the *Bulletin's* functions, including the aims and objectives, intended readership and distribution, content and style, peer-review processes, archiving, and editorial management. The Discussion Paper was released to stimulate a broad discussion and encourage comment to ensure that the *Bulletin* remained a useful tool for the NSW public health workforce. It was published as a *Bulletin* supplement. To encourage feedback about the Discussion Paper's recommendations a survey was conducted.

## METHODS

A one-page fax-back survey and a copy of the *Bulletin* Discussion Paper, accompanied by a covering letter from the Chief Health Officer of NSW inviting participation in the survey, was mailed to a purposeful sample of 1200 people in NSW in December 2000. The sample was based upon the standard distribution list used for policies and publications within the NSW health system but enhanced to ensure thorough coverage of the structures responsible for the delivery of public health functions. This group was further expanded to include members of the *Bulletin's* Editorial Advisory Committee, authors published in the previous two years and peer reviewers or guest editors. Although the *Bulletin's* distribution included a small