

CREATING SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

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The NSW Health Department's Sun Exposure and Physical Activity Policy Unit has commissioned four case studies as part of Project StART (Strategic Audit Resource and Toolkit). 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 definitions¹), 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 fulfil 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 life¹.

Recent research documents environmental barriers to participating in physical activity, such as fears for personal safety and problems with footpaths^{2,3}. 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

Project StART Compendium

No resource kit exists to support the process of providing physical environments which encourage active lifestyles. Project StART included the development of a compendium of information and ideas for action by any member of the community.

The compendium, titled *Creating Supportive Environments for Physical Activity: A toolkit for those who want to modify the physical environment to promote physical activity in their communities*, includes case studies such as the Macquarie project on paths and will be useful to health workers, council workers, school teachers and residents.

Publication is anticipated by September 1997.

To request a copy, write to Bill Bellew at bbell@doh.health.nsw.gov.au or at the NSW Health Department, Locked Mail Bag 961, North Sydney

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 non-experts could use to assess paths. The resulting documents included:

- a **checklist**, including directions for assessing paths and references to relevant technical information;
- technical documents to be used by engineers; and
- a sample **development control plan** for adoption by local governments.

1. Bauman A, Bellew B, Booth M, Hahn A, Stoker I, Thomas M. *Towards best practice for the promotion of physical activity in the Areas of NSW*. December 1996. NSW Health Department, Centre for Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.
2. Craythorn E. *Inactivity and the Environment Report, Dubbo and Wellington*. August 1993. Orana and Far West Region Health Promotion Unit, Report Number 18.
3. Wright C, MacDougall C, Atkinson R, Booth B. *Exercise in daily life: Supportive Environments*. October 1996. Report of a National Heart Foundation Research Project funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services.

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