

# Inquiry into the establishment of a Queensland Health Promotion Commission

## Early Childhood Development

There is an increasing amount of evidence regarding the importance of the foundations of early childhood development and its consequence on the state of future society. The future economic, productivity and social states of society can be significantly influenced by children and their health, wellbeing and development.<sup>1</sup> With the imminent establishment of the Queensland Health Promotion Commission, it is essential that its foundation is underpinned by and has a key focus on the early years, a social determinant of health. With a focus on the earliest years of life and its key influencers, the Queensland Health Promotion Commission will be able to address all of the following concerns, as identified in the Terms of Reference:

- a. approaches to addressing the social determinants of health;
- b. economic and social benefits of strategies to improve health and wellbeing;
- c. population groups disproportionately affected by chronic disease;
- d. emerging approaches and strategies that show significant potential;
- e. ways of partnering across government and with industry and community including collaborative funding, evaluation and research; and
- f. ways of reducing fragmentation in health promotion efforts and increasing shared responsibility across sectors.

One of the greatest potentials in reducing health inequities within a generation is investing in the early years.<sup>2</sup> James Heckman, an American economist and Nobel Prize winner, is renowned for his stance on early childhood development and human capital. He believes that learning and success early on in life leads to learning and success later on in life.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, this is the same principle for failure; failure in the early years of life leads to failure later on in life. It is a revolving effect. Heckman is adamant that investment in early development and learning in children is critical to a society's future.<sup>3</sup> Children are the future of our society. They will be the leaders, teachers, employees, employers, parents, consumers and community members in years to come. By empowering children and allowing for optimal child developmental outcomes, Queensland will address the social determinants of health, the economic and social conditions of health, that are pertinent in the state. This will increase human capital, productivity and will reduce health inequities, yielding an abundant of economic and social benefits.

It has been identified that experiences in the first years of life affect adult health by either cumulative damage over time or by *biological embedding* of adversities during this vulnerable

<sup>1</sup> Woolfenden, S. Goldfeld, S. Raman, S. Eapen, V. Kemp, L. Williams, K. (2013) Inequity in child health: The importance of early childhood development. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 49(9), E365-E369. doi:10.1111/jpc.12171

<sup>2</sup> Commission on Social Determinants of Health. Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health. Final Report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health. World Health Organisation [Internet]. 2008 [cited 26 November 2015]. Available from: [http://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/final\\_report/csdh\\_finalreport\\_2008.pdf](http://www.who.int/social_determinants/final_report/csdh_finalreport_2008.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Heckman J. Invest in the very young\*. Importance of Early Childhood Development. Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development [Internet]. 2007 [cited 26 November 2015]. Available from: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/sites/default/files/textes-experts/en/669/invest-in-the-very-young.pdf>.

developmental period.<sup>4</sup> This research supports prevention and health promotion for early childhood development as a sustainable and most effective approach than attempting to modify adult health behaviours.

It is a necessity that the State of Queensland is able to contribute to the productivity of Australia. Evidence suggests that it is more likely that children who have competent brain development in their younger years will develop the capabilities and skills needed to increase productivity within Queensland and Australia that will be competitive in a global society.<sup>5</sup> This is becoming more necessary than ever before as the Australian workforce is declining due to lower fertility rates and an ageing population.

The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne's Centre for Community Child Health (CCH), is a national and international leader in child and adolescent health promotion and prevention, and aims to improve the health and wellbeing of children and adolescents through leadership in healthcare, research and education.<sup>6</sup> This best practice model is what Queensland should aspire to. Currently Queensland has very limited early years health promotion and prevention initiatives, programs and strategies. The investment in Queensland, has been a complete focus on a treatment and a medical model, at odds with international and national evidence.

Harvard Centre on the Developing Child, United States, have a multitude of policy briefs and strong evidence to support a health promotion model that focuses on optimal child development in influencing health outcomes. Vital evidence signifies that early experiences are literally 'built into our bodies'. <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-foundations-of-lifelong-health-video/>

Harvard Centre on the Developing Child highlight three key foundations of lifelong health:

- “1. A stable and responsive environment of relationships. These provide young children with consistent, nurturing, and protective interactions with adults, which help them develop adaptive capacities that promote learning and well-regulated stress response systems.
2. Safe and supportive physical, chemical, and built environments. These provide children with places that are free from toxins and fear, allow active and safe exploration, and offer their families opportunities to exercise and form social connections.
3. Sound and appropriate nutrition. This includes health-promoting food intake and eating habits, beginning with the future mother's preconception nutritional status.”

It is imperative that Queensland's Health Promotion Commission builds a strong partnership between universities and other research organisations and explore the best practice evidence to increase the health and wellbeing of children through health promotion underpinned by collaborative funding, evaluation and research. With the World Health Organisation and the United

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<sup>4</sup> Shonkoff, J, Boyce, T, McEwen, B. Neuroscience, molecular biology, and the childhood roots of health disparities: building a new framework for health promotion and disease prevention. JAMA: the Journal of the American Medical Association [Internet]. 2009 [cited 27 November 2015];301(21):2252. doi: 10.1001/jama.2009.754.

<sup>5</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. Investing in the early years – a national early childhood development strategy: an initiative of the Council of Australian Governments [Internet]. 2009 [cited 26 November 2015]. Available from: [http://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/national\\_ECD\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/national_ECD_strategy.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. Research at The Royal Children's Hospital Campus.

Nations strong focus on early childhood development, this will place Queensland on a level that is competitive nationally and globally.

Furthermore, it is essential that health promotion efforts are made by all sectors to reduce fragmentation in health promotion. Health promotion is based on a holistic model, recognising that health is 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease'.<sup>7</sup> As such, it is essential that there is a shared responsibility in health promotion across the sectors. Building on collaboration and partnership models, health promotion in early childhood development is achievable. Building a Child Friendly Community works to bring all influencers of children's health (eg: housing, education, health, all levels of government, local business, universities) together in order to – work together, share funding and resources, reduce fragmentation, share knowledge and skills. A great example of this has been established in Logan, The Child Friendly Community Consortium which has morphed into the Logan Together movement.

The Queensland Health Promotion Commission is an exciting and excellence move in the right direction to place Queensland on equal footing with the other states of Australia and ultimately, be the leaders in health promotion. The evidence overwhelming supports a strong focus on the early years.

"People like to say that children's health is our nation's wealth, but until we really start to act on these ideas...we will not get to being a healthier population and a more prosperous society."

InBrief: The Foundations of Lifelong Health

<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Foundations-of-Lifelong-Health.pdf>

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<sup>7</sup> Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19-22 June, 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948.