

National centre could boost disease control

Coordinated response critical for emergencies.

Health experts and a parliamentary committee are urging the federal government to investigate the development of a new national Centre for Disease Control (CDC) to protect the population from infectious diseases.

A range of health experts made the recommendation in submissions to the House of Representatives Health Committee's inquiry into health issues across international borders.

While there are a number of state and federal agencies tasked with infectious disease response and prevention, the push to establish a CDC comes from concerns that Australia is missing an overarching body to coordinate and lead a national health emergency response.

"Australia has very strong capacity in lots of areas but there tends to be fragmentation both at the national level and in our capacity to respond regionally and more broadly, because we lack the sort of coordination that would achieve that," said Professor Peter McIntyre from the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance of Vaccine-Preventable Diseases.

Professor Geoffrey Shellam of the University of Western Australia echoed his colleague's concerns, saying the current model was confusing.

"At the moment a lot of the national policy around communicable disease control is put together by these networks and committees from around the country," Professor Shellam said.

"It is a slow, cumbersome, inefficient process compared to if you have a dedicated unit at the national level to say why we need to have a national policy on this and the expertise is there to do it. That does not happen at the moment. We muddle along."

But Megan Morris of the Department of Health and Ageing's Office of Health Protection disagreed,

telling the committee coordination worked well within the current system of communicable disease control.

"If there is a health emergency at any time, the Australian Health Protection Committee is convened," Ms Morris said.

"I have seen it convened with half an hour's notice. It comprises of the chief health officers from each jurisdiction, the Department of Defence and also the Attorney-General's Emergency Management Australia.

"They get together at the drop of a hat and people phone in from wherever they are. Things happen very quickly to address whatever the health emergency is.

"In a pandemic you have to bring in other parts of jurisdictional governance to make things work."

In its report *Diseases have no borders* the House Health Committee has recommended the federal government join forces with the states and territories to undertake a comprehensive national audit and mapping exercise to identify all agencies, expert committees and working groups involved in managing infectious disease risks.

Once completed, the information would be used to identify any policy or response gaps that need to be addressed,

as a basis for an independent review of whether to establish a national centre for infectious disease control.

However some experts questioned the value of creating a CDC in Australia, saying such a highly centralised model may have more benefits for countries with larger populations such as the United States.

Department of Health and Ageing medical adviser Dr Jennifer Firman said Canada provided a more relevant disease control model for Australia.

"If you look at that [US] CDC model, the CDC has 15,000 employees in 50 states and does chronic health as well as communicable disease," Dr Firman said.

"If you are looking for a government system that is similar to Australia, Canada has provinces akin to our states and territories. Canada has a CDC with 2,000 to 3,000 employees, and they also do some aspects of chronic health."

Dr Firman said all of these systems are a hub-and-spoke network of communicable disease control.

"Some people have an enormous hub and do everything in it, and that is the [US] CDC model," she said.

"Is that the best model? Their public health and health outcomes are not as good as Australia's, by a long shot.

"That is a model, but does it deliver you exactly what you want in terms of outcomes? Perhaps not. The country's system suits that country really." •

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