RACP
Specialists. Together
EDUCATE ADVOCATE INNOVATE

RACP submission to Preventive Health SA Draft Strategic Plan for Preventive Health Action 2026-2034

About The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP)

The RACP trains, educates and advocates on behalf of over 24,000 physicians and 9,800 trainee physicians, across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, including 1587 Fellows and 645 trainee physicians in South Australia. The RACP represents a broad range of medical specialties including general medicine, paediatrics and child health, cardiology, respiratory medicine, neurology, oncology, public health medicine, infectious diseases medicine, occupational and environmental medicine, palliative medicine, sexual health medicine, rehabilitation medicine, geriatric medicine, and addiction medicine. Beyond the drive for medical excellence, the RACP is committed to developing health policies which bring vital improvements to the wellbeing of patients, the medical profession and the community.

Contact – Samuel Dettmann, Senior Policy Officer, via policy@racp.edu.au

We acknowledge and pay respect to the Traditional Custodians and Elders – past, present and emerging – of the lands and waters on which RACP members and staff live, learn and work. The RACP acknowledges Māori as tangata whenua and Te Tiriti o Waitangi partners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Introduction

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on Preventive Health SA's draft *Healthier South Australians across generations: Our Strategic Plan for Preventive Health Action 2026–2034*.

We commend Preventive Health SA for developing this important Strategic Plan and look forward to continued engagement throughout the life of the Plan.

This submission should be read in conjunction with the RACP's 2021 submission to the draft National Preventive Health Strategy which outlines many of the principles and policy positions that continue to inform our approach to preventive health.

Recommendations

1. **The Strategic Plan should recognise physician workforce sustainability as a preventive health priority.**

The RACP encourages recognition within the Strategic Plan that physician wellbeing, retention, career longevity, and training sustainability are important enablers of preventive health. Physicians play a critical role across the continuum of care through health promotion, disease prevention, early intervention, management of chronic disease and its risk factors, research and education.

Maintaining a sustainable physician workforce is essential to achieving the objectives of the Strategic Plan and meeting the evolving health needs of South Australians.

The RACP also encourages alignment between the Strategic Plan and statewide medical workforce planning. This should encompass all 33 RACP-trained physician specialties and be informed by ongoing assessment of population health needs, service gaps and workforce requirements. Particular attention should be given to ensuring the sustainability of the public health physician workforce in South Australia.

The development of a fully funded statewide medical workforce strategy should be supported by a comprehensive, statewide health needs and service gap analysis to identify current and emerging physician workforce challenges and strategically target training opportunities and workforce initiatives to areas of greatest need before critical shortages emerge.

Together, a workforce strategy and gap analysis would help to address service inequities and ensure physicians and trainee physicians are supported to work where they are most needed across South Australia.

2. **The Strategic Plan should recognise public health physicians as a preventive health priority.**

The RACP and its Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine are concerned about the declining capacity and long-term sustainability of South Australia's public heath physician workforce. This workforce has experienced a sustained reduction in capacity, raising concerns about the state's ability to maintain the public health leadership, expertise and workforce capability required to implement the Strategic Plan, deliver the State Public Health Plan, and

respond to future public health challenges. Strengthening South Australia's public health physician workforce will be critical to ensuring the Strategic Plan can achieve its objectives.

Public health physicians in South Australia play a crucial role in disease prevention, health protection, emergency preparedness and response, and addressing inequities across the state. However, this workforce is under significant strain due to an ageing cohort, declining numbers of supervisors and trainees, and challenges in sustaining viable training pathways.

Public health medicine specialists (Public health physicians) are unique in that they span multiple areas of medical practice, as well as population health. As part of their specialist training, public health physicians complete at least three years of clinical medicine (or equivalent, such as clinical medicine plus pathology). In addition, they have significant training across the broad discipline of public health. No other health practitioners, whether medical or non-medical, have these specific training requirements. This means public health physicians can collaborate easily with all health practitioner groups.

Unlike hospital-based specialties, public health physicians predominantly train outside the hospital system, developing the skills required to improve population health, prevent disease, respond to public health emergencies, and address broader social and environmental health challenges. Sustaining public health medicine training therefore requires targeted investment, tailored incentives and dedicated support to strengthen training pathways, build supervisory capacity and attract and retain future public health physicians in South Australia.

Without a sustainable local training pathway, South Australia risks losing its capacity to develop and retain these highly skilled specialists, undermining the resilience, capability and effectiveness of the public health system to meet the health needs of its communities now and into the future.

3. **The Strategic Plan should include a South Australian Government commitment to allocate at least 5% of its health expenditure on preventive health by 2030, consistent with the National Preventive Health Strategy, and set out a credible and transparent trajectory for achieving this target.**

Dedicated funding should be protected for the purpose of prevention and maintained over time as a matter of principle.

The annual health budget process should be guided by an enduring commitment to achieving 5% preventive health expenditure from 2030 and should clearly itemise the expenditure that comprises this commitment.

To support this commitment, the Strategic Plan should also provide greater detail on how prevention investments will be monitored and evaluated. This should include criteria for assessing the effectiveness, cost-effectiveness and opportunity cost of prevention initiatives, and link prevention-based investment decisions to the "Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework" mentioned in the Strategic Plan on page 30.

The Strategic Plan should provide greater detail on the proposed Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Framework. This should include clear performance indicators, baseline measures, targets, reporting arrangements, evaluation methodologies, and criteria for assessing the effectiveness, cost-effectiveness and opportunity cost of prevention initiatives. A more clearly

articulated framework would strengthen accountability, support evidence-informed investment decisions, and enable progress towards the Strategic Plan's objectives to be measured and reported transparently over time.

4. **The Strategic Plan should strengthen its focus on children and young people as a priority population for preventive health action and articulate a stronger life-course approach to prevention.**

While we welcome the inclusion of child-specific targets in Appendix D, the Strategic Plan could be further strengthened by explicitly recognising children and young people as a priority focus for preventive health action.

Greater emphasis on children and young people would help ensure preventive efforts are directed to the period of life where they can have the greatest long-term impact.

The Strategic Plan could also strengthen its alignment with existing child health and development frameworks, including the First 1000 Days Framework, First 2000 Days Framework and the National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People. Greater integration with these frameworks would help ensure a coordinated and consistent approach to prevention across the life course.

In addition, the Strategic Plan should outline how preventive health efforts will align with early identification and early intervention initiatives, both within and beyond the NDIS such as Thriving Kids, and address the need for stronger collaboration between social services and the health sector. Better coordination of policy, planning and investment across these portfolios has the potential to improve outcomes for children and families while supporting more effective use of public resources.

Finally, the Strategic Plan should include an explicit commitment to the importance of developmental health and its influence on lifelong health, wellbeing and participation. While injury prevention, obesity, and infectious diseases remain important priorities, developmental, behavioural and neurodevelopmental conditions are increasingly recognised as a major contribution to health, education and social outcomes across the life course.

Greater emphasis on developmental health, including early identification and intervention, would help ensure preventive health efforts are directed towards achieving the greatest long-term benefits for children, families and communities.

We also urge a consideration of recommendations made in the RACP's two position statements, *Early Childhood: The Importance of the Early Years* , and *Indigenous child health in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand*.

5. **The Strategic Plan should consider including a section on prevention for older people**

Older South Australians are among the state's fastest-growing demographic group, with the fastest proportional growth concentrated in the oldest age cohorts, particularly people aged 85 years and over. South Australia's own ageing plan says some regions expect a doubling of people aged 80–84 years, tripling of 85–89 years, and quadrupling of people over 90 years.

A section on prevention for older people could focus on primordial and primary prevention initiatives that support healthy ageing, such as promoting healthy diets, regular physical activity, strength and balance training, opportunities for social connection to reduce loneliness and isolation, smoking cessation, reducing harmful alcohol consumption, healthy sleep, and preventive oral health.

Additional examples include falls prevention programs, vaccination, screening and management of cardiovascular risk factors, osteoporosis prevention, hearing and vision health, cognitive health promotion, age-friendly housing and neighbourhood design, access to green space and walkable communities, transport that enables continued community participation, digital inclusion to reduce social exclusion, and initiatives that support older people to remain engaged in volunteering, education and employment.

6. **The Strategic Plan should strengthen the role of healthcare settings in preventive health delivery.**

In addition to the Strategic Plan's strong focus on the social determinants of health, we encourage greater emphasis on settings including hospitals, specialist clinics (both public outpatient and private sector) and primary care settings as key environments for preventive health intervention and early risk management.

Embedding prevention throughout the healthcare system is key to reducing future disease burden and ensuring that preventive health initiatives reach people who may not otherwise engage with dedicated preventive health programs.

It would also be valuable to have public health physicians (and public health medicine trainees) formally employed in all major public hospitals. Here they would collaborate with people and organisations in the community (clinicians, non-government organisations, local councils, et cetera) with the aim of preventing people being admitted to hospital. Then, within the hospital, they would collaborate with clinicians and others around the hospital to prevent complications that delay patient recovery and discharge.

Many South Australians at greatest risk of chronic disease have regular contact with hospitals, adult physicians and paediatricians, and other healthcare professionals with expertise and experience at the intersection of prevention and treatment. These clinical encounters provide valuable opportunities to identify risk factors, deliver brief interventions, support behaviour change, promote screening and vaccination, and coordinate preventive care for people with complex health needs.

The Strategic Plan should recognise and support the contribution of healthcare settings to preventive health by strengthening links between clinical care and population health approaches, and by encouraging the systematic integration of prevention into routine healthcare delivery.

7. **The Strategic Plan should include a specific commitment to reducing geographic and socioeconomic inequities in access to preventive health services, supported by targeted strategies for rural, regional and disadvantaged communities and measurable indicators of progress.**

The Strategic Plan should include a specific commitment to reducing geographic and

socioeconomic inequities in access to preventive health services, supported by targeted strategies for rural, regional and disadvantaged communities and measurable indicators of progress. The RACP is committed to improving access to quality healthcare for people living in regional, rural, and remote Australia, including through implementation of the RACP Regional, Rural, and Remote Physician Strategy.

A stronger focus on reducing geographic and socioeconomic inequities would help ensure that the benefits of preventive health investment are shared equitably across South Australia.

While the Strategic Plan appropriately emphasis equity, it could be strengthened by more clearly articulating how preventive health initiatives will reach communities that experience the greatest burden of disease and face the greatest barriers to accessing healthcare services and healthcare professionals. This should include consideration of service accessibility, workforce capacity, culturally safe care, and place-based approaches that respond to the needs of local communities.

8. **The Strategic Plan should strengthen its focus on work, employment, and poverty as determinants of health.**

The Strategic Plan would be improved by including a greater focus on secure employment, workforce participation, and poverty reduction as fundamental determinants of health, together with specific identified outcome areas through which Preventive Health SA can influence policy and support cross-government action.

The draft appropriately recognises the social determinants of health, but employment and economic security receive relatively limited attention given their significant influence on health outcomes.

Unemployment, underemployment, insecure work and poverty are strongly associated with poorer physical and mental health, reduced life expectancy and barriers to accessing healthcare. Conversely, secure and meaningful employment is associated with improved health, wellbeing and social participation.

The World Health Organization prioritises income and social protection, unemployment and job insecurity and working conditions as three key underlying drivers of health outcomes. Effective prevention requires not only reducing behavioural risk factors but also addressing the socioeconomic conditions that shape health across the life course.

The RACP and its Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine are committed to advancing the Health Benefits of Good Work across the healthcare system and broader community. We encourage consideration, where appropriate, of the principles and recommendations contained in the RACP's Employment, Poverty and Health: A Statement of Principles, and its supporting evidence review.

9. **The Strategic Plan should strengthen the use of health impact assessment and health-informed planning processes across government.**

While the Strategic Plan recognises the importance of creating healthier environments, it could provide greater emphasis on the practical mechanisms that embed health considerations into

planning, transport, housing and infrastructure decisions. This could include greater use of health impact assessments and other tools to ensure health outcomes are systematically considered in major policy, planning, and investment decisions. There is also an opportunity to strengthen cross-government action and accountability to support the integration of health considerations across these sectors, including the identification of current legislation that enables or constrains this integration.

The RACP supports a Health in All Policies approach to prevention, policymaking, and government in South Australia. This recognises that many of the most important drivers of health lie outside the healthcare system and that decisions relating to planning, transport, housing, education, employment, energy and the environment can have significant impacts on health and wellbeing.

Embedding health considerations across government decision-making would help create healthier communities, reduce health inequities and support a more preventive, whole-of-government approach to improving population health.

Conclusion

The RACP welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of South Australia's Preventive Health Strategic Plan. The suggestions and recommendations outlined in this submission are intended to strengthen the Strategic Plan's implementation, accountability and long-term impact, and align with and are informed by the RACP's own policy priorities and our commitment to improving the health and wellbeing of all South Australians.

We welcome the consideration of the RACP's recommendations and look forward to working together to strengthen preventive health in South Australia. We would also welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss them further.

For further information or to engage with the RACP, please contact Samuel Dettmann, Senior Policy Officer, via policy@racp.edu.au.