



31 August, 2011

New Zealand Medical Association  
26 The Terrace  
Wellington

Tēnā Koutou

### **Fact and Action Sheets on Health Inequities**

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) warmly congratulates Tony Blakely, Don Simmers, and other members of the New Zealand Medical Association who compiled the fact and action sheets on health inequities. The combined document presents a short and compelling case for tackling preventable disease and ill health at source, and a coordinated high level strategy for improving health equity, both of which NZNO endorses wholeheartedly.

The general code of ethics shared by all health practitioners is fundamentally based on the principles of equity and fairness and it is right that an understanding the social determinants of health compels appropriate action. It is also sensible, given increasing evidence that equitable societies are healthier, happier and more productive<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, demographic and health trends indicate that the future costs of health care will be unsustainable unless demand, particularly for preventable disease and chronic care, can be reduced. That means addressing the drivers of disease and chronic illness i.e. the social determinants of health.

While lists are bound to be arbitrary to some degree, NZNO believes that the list of health inequalities in Aotearoa New Zealand is generally accurate and

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Richard G. Wilkinson & Kate Pickett. 2010. *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*. London: Bloomsbury Press.

complete, though we question the conclusions drawn from the graph in point 9. We suggest that their inclusion is an unnecessary distraction from what is the central thesis that "*An unequal distribution of social determinants (e.g. income, housing conditions, and employment) is fundamental to driving health inequalities*". It is also not clear in Point 7 whether the "*Prevalence of bipolar disorder and substance use disorder are much higher for Māori and Pacific people*" is a function of ethnicity or deprivation or clinical bias; the latter is not mentioned elsewhere but should be a consideration given that what disadvantages one group almost certainly privileges another.

With regard to the the list of things that have been done to address health inequities, NZNO would include the following as key conceptual actions to reduce inequalities:

- the move to population-based and primary health care signalled with the New Zealand Public Health and Disability Act 2000 and the Primary Health Care Strategy 2001;
- the shift from institutional to community care in mental health and disability; and
- the visionary Accident Compensation Scheme<sup>2</sup>, offering comprehensive universal no fault cover for personal injury, rehabilitation and compensation.

Of the ten actions outlined, NZNO recommends a greater focus on:

- addressing the fundamental and historic access barriers to primary health care through alternative funding pathways to private GP-based capitation; and
- better utilisation of the health workforce – aligning health practitioner knowledge and skills with health needs.

Professor Marmot challenged us with his analysis of the current situation: "*We know the problem, we pretty much know how to fix it, but do we have the will?*".

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<sup>2</sup> The original 1972 Accident Compensation Act, was replaced with the Injury Prevention, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2001, and later with the Accident Compensation Act 2010.

NZNO is confident that the NZMA is demonstrating its will in this strategy and is proud to endorse it.

Nāku noa, nā



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### **ABOUT NZNO**

*NZNO is the leading professional and industrial organisation for nurses in Aotearoa New Zealand, representing over 45 000 nurses, midwives, students, kaimahi hauora and health workers on a range of employment-related and professional issues. Te Runanga o Aotearoa comprises our Māori membership and is the arm through which our Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership is articulated.*

*NZNO provides leadership, research and support for professional excellence in nursing, negotiates collective employment agreements on behalf of its members and collaborates with government and other agencies throughout the health sector. Nurses are the largest group of health professionals comprising half the health workforce.*

*The NZNO vision is “Freed to care, Proud to nurse”. Our members enhance the health and wellbeing of all people of Aotearoa New Zealand and are united in their professional and industrial aspirations to achieve a safe, sustainable and accessible system of public health care for all New Zealanders.*