

# The new Health Development Agency

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The White Paper *Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation*<sup>1</sup> presents a vision of public health action founded on partnerships between and among individuals, communities and government, with a special focus on tackling health inequalities. This concept of a new, much broader, infrastructure for public health is the most innovative aspect of the government's policy. How to create and sustain effective partnerships and create active participation within local communities is thus one of the key health development challenges.

However, the White Paper noted that the variable quality of public health work and a lack of sufficiently robust evidence were barriers to standard setting. In order to address some of these problems, a new Health Development Agency (HDA) will be set up to help organisations and individual practitioners base their work on the highest standards and, over time, raise the quality of the public health function in England. The Health Education Authority (HEA) will be transformed into this new agency in 2000.

Like the HEA, the new agency will be part of the National Health Service, with Special Health Authority status. It will be an important part of the new public health infrastructure and a key part of its remit will be to contribute towards the reduction of health inequalities. It is envisaged that the HDA will work in partnership with other organisations to fulfil the following functions:-

- To disseminate information and evidence of good practice in an authoritative, timely and effective manner;
- To maintain an up-to-date map of the evidence base for public health and health improvement;
- To commission research and evaluation to fill the gaps in the existing evidence base;
- To advise on the setting of standards for public health and health promotion practice, and on the implementation of those standards at national and local level;
- To provide advice on targeting health promotion effectively at the most disadvantaged in society and narrowing the health gap;
- To advise on the education and training needs of the public health workforce and the work required to develop their capacity and capability to deliver the new agenda.

The new organisation will be tuned in to local and regional needs and will not duplicate the efforts of other agencies. On standard setting, for example, the HDA

will identify what already exists and commission or advise on work that is needed to fill the gaps. It is clear that the organisation will be very much research led, as the role of research within the new HDA and the new public health agenda will be pivotal to achieving success. Social approaches to the organisation and the delivery of public health, intuitively make a lot of sense to people working in the field, as practitioners tend to believe these methods have considerable potential for health improvement. It is essential, however, to gather evidence that such approaches are effective. Identifying robust indicators of success, finding reliable methods for evaluating complex innovative interventions and providing models of good practice in cross-sectoral working are some of the tasks ahead.

It is early days to pronounce on the precise shape of the HEA's successor, but work is in progress and a number of consultation events are taking place with key stakeholders to help shape the new Health Development Agency. What is certain is that the HDA needs to galvanise all the players who are working to improve health to have an impact and make a difference. The effectiveness of cross-sectoral partnerships will be pivotal in improving the nation's health.

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## References

1. Secretary of State for Health (1999) *Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation*, London: the Stationery Office.