

Saving our Health System

MEDIA RELEASE

23 APRIL 2024

The Director of a National Science Challenge focused on New Zealand's most pressing health issues is not mincing words when it comes to the state of our health system.

“Our hospitals are over stretched, we have a shortage of doctors and this problem is only going to get worse as our population ages,” says Professor Sir Jim Mann.

These comments come on the back of new directives from Health New Zealand to limit staff costs, using measures such as closing some vacant roles, encouraging staff to use annual leave and not covering daytime staff on sick leave.

Professor Mann says many health problems requiring hospital-level care are preventable. And the best way to prevent these is by making the environment we live in healthier for the whole population.

“We don't have an unending source of taxpayer funds to keep expanding our health system. An obvious solution to this problem is to introduce measures which will help prevent people getting sick in the first place.”

“We can do this by increasing access to healthy food and good quality housing, improving air quality, better access to public transport and increasing the walkability of our streets.”

The Healthier Lives National Science Challenge, led by Professor Mann, has brought together a network of researchers to find ways to help prevent and treat the major health conditions facing New Zealanders – cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and obesity.

But funding for the National Science Challenges finishes at the end of June and there is no replacement in sight. Other countries facing these same health problems are now moving ahead.

“The UK government has just funded a national population health research network to help tackle these critical health issues and it's being led by Professor Nick Wareham, one of the international advisors to Healthier Lives,” says Professor Mann.

Nick Wareham is a medical doctor and professor of epidemiology at the University of Cambridge. On a recent visit to attend a Healthier Lives symposium, he met with New Zealand public health leaders to discuss the latest UK health developments.

Professor Cliona Ni Mhurchu, Deputy Director of Healthier Lives, leads its food and physical activity research theme, and understands the importance of bringing together researchers to address these health issues.

“New Zealand has a wealth of expertise in policy evaluation and modelling. Healthier Lives researchers have evaluated and recommended improvements to policies aimed at preventing diet-related disease, and have modelled the health benefits and costs savings for several other policy initiatives,” says Professor Ni Mhurchu.

“Other groups in the Healthier Lives network have generated evidence showing how we can reconfigure urban environments to promote walking and cycling, and introduce new shared transport options to equitably improve our health and the health of our planet.”

Professor Ni Mhurchu says losing these important Science Challenge networks, set up by the previous National government to tackle New Zealand’s most pressing health issues, could delay the implementation of measures that will not only improve our health but will ease the pressure on our health system.

“As well as the personal costs, these major health problems undermine economic prosperity and create unsustainable pressure on our health services,” says Professor Ni Mhurchu.

“Taking steps to improve the health of our population, like they are doing in the UK, would relieve the pressure on our healthcare system so we can all access it when we need it.”

-ENDS-

For more information, please contact:

Professor Jim Mann

Director, Healthier Lives–He Oranga Hauora National Science Challenge

University of Otago

Email: jim.mann@otago.ac.nz

Dr Cherie Stayner

Science Communicator, Healthier Lives–He Oranga Hauora National Science Challenge

University of Otago

Email: cherie.stayner@otago.ac.nz