The Healthy Built Environments Program (HBEP): An Overview

WHY IS HEALTH AN ISSUE FOR OUR CITIES?

As Australia faces increasing health costs from rising rates of obesity, diabetes and other lifestyle diseases, health workers are seeking to influence the design of cities to make them more supportive of healthy ways of living. Research continues to demonstrate the links between modern health epidemics and the way of life in cities. Car-dominated transport, reduced opportunities for physical activity, increased fast-food availability and lack of social connection are all implicated. Increasingly the health sector is focusing on prevention. To be effective, health professionals need to work in collaboration with other professional groups, especially those from the built environment.

WHAT IS THE HBEP?

The HBEP is all about working collaboratively with health professionals so that together we can create built environments that support people being healthy in their everyday lives. The HBEP is part of the City Futures Research Centre at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). We receive our core funding from the NSW Department of Health.

Our vision is that built environments will be planned, designed, developed and managed to promote and protect health for all people.

WHAT DO WE DO?

The HBEP aims to support the development of healthy communities in NSW, now and into the future, by ensuring that the built environment promotes good health for everyone. This is achieved through three core strategies:

Research

The HBEP fosters interdisciplinary research which is policy relevant. We recently completed a major review of scholarly literature on the role of the built environment in supporting human health. The review discusses the research evidence that supports the development, prioritisation and implementation of healthy built environment policies and practices.

Leadership and Advocacy

We advocate for closer links between health and the built environment across government and non-government agencies, the private sector and the general community. We write scholarly publications to disseminate the latest research on healthy built environments. We also write regular columns in professional journals, contribute to the popular media, give talks and hold promotional events.

Education and Workforce Development

The HBEP delivers innovative, cross-disciplinary education and capacity building. We run inter-disciplinary courses on healthy built environments for undergraduate and postgraduate students at UNSW, hold regular public forums, and host seminars for professionals working in health and urban planning. The HBEP is also developing e-learning resources on a variety of topics.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Visit the HBEP’s website to find out lots more about our work:

http://www.be.unsw.edu.au/programmes/healthy-built-environments-program/about
The Healthy Built Environments Program (HBEP) has successfully advocated for closer links between the built environment and health through publications, newsletters, policy submissions, popular media articles, conferences and public events. This poster provides a snapshot of the HBEP’s advocacy work, focusing on key initiatives that have advanced policy and practice in NSW and beyond.

POLICY SUBMISSIONS

NSW Planning System Review
The HBEP has made a series of submissions to the NSW Government as it undertakes the first comprehensive review of the State’s Planning System in over 30 years. In association with other members of the NSW Healthy Planning Expert Working Group, the HBEP has called for the Government to place human health and wellbeing at the forefront of the new Planning Act.

A New Metropolitan Strategy for Sydney
The HBEP has made a detailed submission to the NSW Government as it develops a new metropolitan strategy for Sydney. This submission outlines key steps that must be taken to ensure Australia’s largest city supports the health and wellbeing of its citizens, both now and into the future.

NSW Strata and Community Scheme Laws
In response to the NSW Government’s review of the State’s strata and community scheme laws, the HBEP has made a submission outlining how strata living can enhance individual health while respecting the needs of the broader community in close residential living.

National Urban Policy
In 2011, the Federal Government released Its National Urban Policy. The HBEP’s submission on the discussion paper was considered in the framing of this Policy, which endorses key healthy planning principles and initiatives.

NEW PLANNER COLUMN

For three years, the HBEP’s regular ‘Healthy Built Environments’ column in New Planner, the journal of the NSW planning profession, has raised awareness of planning’s role in creating built environments that support people’s health as part of everyday living. The HBEP column has become an invaluable source of information for planners who are keen to incorporate healthy built environment principles, policies and actions in their work.

HBEP Director, Associate Professor Susan Thompson, was also invited to be guest editor of the June 2012 Special Issue of New Planner, which focused on healthy urban environments and active living. This Issue is available as a free download from the HBEP’s website.

WEBSITE AND NEWSLETTERS

The HBEP’s website provides an important and highly accessible resource for health and built environment professionals, researchers, and students. It contains relevant publications, educational resources and links to other websites. The HBEP also distributes a quarterly newsletter, which brings up-to-date news and resources to the attention of healthy built environment stakeholders across Australia.

MEDIA CONTRIBUTIONS

The Media increasingly seek comments from HBEP staff members on a variety of healthy planning issues, from the walkability of suburbs and sustainable housing design, to food security and the health impacts of climate change. We have recently contributed to The Sydney Morning Herald, The Conversation, Diabetes Connect and GU Health’s Inform.

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Chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, depression and cancer are the most common cause of death worldwide. The built environment has a significant impact on three of the main behavioural risk factors for chronic disease: physical inactivity, social isolation and obesity.

By focusing on the built environment’s role in facilitating physical activity, social interaction and access to fresh fruits and vegetables, the aim of the project is to understand how different residential localities can make healthy everyday living a reality, and reduce the burden of chronic disease.

### WHO IS INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT?

This project is funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant. The project partners are Landcom, the National Heart Foundation and the South Western Sydney Local Health District.

### WHERE IS THE RESEARCH TAKING PLACE?

The research for this project is being undertaken in four socio-demographically and geographically diverse neighbourhoods in NSW: Victoria Park, Rouse Hill, Airds Bradbury and Renwick.

### WHAT IS THE PROJECT ABOUT?

### HOW ARE WE DOING THE RESEARCH?

We are using different methods to conduct the research, which are outlined below.

**Healthy Neighbourhood Audits**

A Healthy Neighbourhood Audit Instrument is being used to map the key features and infrastructure of each neighbourhood, such as land uses, walking and cycling networks, public transport systems, open space, street trees and furniture, amenities, and traffic calming measures. The audit instrument is also being used to record detailed environmental observations about how different spaces are used, how people move through and between spaces, and perceptions of safety.

**Market Basket and Farmers’ Market Surveys**

Food outlets in each neighbourhood are being assessed to provide an understanding of how residents access healthy food. The research team are using a Market Basket Survey Instrument to record the availability, price and quality of food items needed to satisfy typical nutritional requirements. Farmers’ markets in each locality are also being assessed using a similar method.

**Focus Groups**

Focus groups are being held in each neighbourhood to allow residents and community workers to participate in group discussions about how their neighbourhoods support healthy everyday living. Each focus group participant will be asked to fill out a survey with questions about the types of physical activities they take part in, how they interact with their neighbours and community, and how they get fresh fruits and vegetables.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

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The benefits of active transport are often identified as a way to address the rising incidence of chronic diseases associated with physical inactivity. It is also destined to play an important role in society's transition to less carbon intensive cities.

Despite the benefits of active transport, the private car continues to dominate mobility behaviour. Research often conceptualises this domination in relatively functional terms, such as the car's unparalleled speed and reliability. Policies aimed at reducing car use are usually directed at overcoming these barriers. The pursuit of higher density cities, for example, is regularly justified as a way to decrease distances between uses and facilitate the uptake of active transport.

A potential flaw in this policy approach is that even when the car is not the fastest, most convenient or even reliable way to travel, people still choose to drive. Deeper understandings of resistance to active transport modes are therefore required.

What will it take to challenge the hegemony of the car?

Transition away from car use will require unprecedented disruption to existing ways of "being" in modern life. The extent of this disruption has been underestimated by existing policy approaches to urban planning for active transport and needs to be considered if the car's hegemony is to be challenged.