

Community-based environmental health: should health be integrated with environment?

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Introduction

Valerie A. Brown, Rosemary Nicholson, Peter Stephenson, Kara-Jane Bennett and Jim Smith, the authors of 'Grass Roots and Common Ground: Guidelines for Community-based Environmental Health Action, A Discussion Paper' (ISBN 0 9578518 0 4) have done a professional job of expounding and advancing a framework for the development of community-based environmental health action plans. This 109 page 2002 publication can be found at http://sites.uws.edu.au/research/rimc/grassroots_index.html and was published in Canberra by the Regional Monitoring Centre, University of Western Sydney. In a competent presentation of a particular point of view, the authors have advanced the theme of combining the traditionally disparate environmental and health services. This innovative approach comes as no surprise since the first named author, Emeritus Professor Valerie A. Brown, recipient of the Order of Australia in 1999, is well known for her national and international leadership in public and environmental health. It is certain that this book has "set the stage for a national consultation process" and it remains to be seen whether policies and frameworks will be developed and implemented that conform to this particular vision.

The book advocates the promotion of Integrated Local Area Planning, the development of integrated environmental and health legislative frameworks, harmony between mandatory and voluntary legislative frameworks and finally the realisation of these guidelines for community-based environmental health action.

Chapter 1

Community as stakeholders in local environmental health

Here the need for the development of a community-based action plan is justified and the theme of integrating health and environment is laid out. The work builds productively on the National Environmental Health Strategy, developed in 1999, which initially aimed to bring stakeholders together.

The authors define environmental health practice in the 21st century as the availability of environmental and physical security for humans, workplaces, settlements, and global self-supporting systems, and note quite rightly that the environmental health profession cannot do all this in isolation. Although collaboration is stated as an essential to this approach, it is acknowledged that this is difficult because of the varied backgrounds of the stakeholder groups and their different agendas.

Representative stakeholders (advocates) were selected from a broad spectrum ranging from science to public health but excluding environmental and occupational medicine representatives. Practising Indigenous environmental health workers were included, but it was not clear under which decision-making dimension they fell, so the design may have been compromised.

It was unfortunate that most community representative groups withdrew after the initial interview due to several reasons including a lack of direct community (grass roots) representation. In their defence, the authors state that their advocates had direct community experience despite the fact that an advocate was quoted as saying, "We know we should work with the community – but we don't much".

Chapter 2

Community as partners in local environmental health: a survey

An excellent review of issues commonly faced by communities and stakeholders is presented with a clear indication of where more effort needs to be placed. The leading issues derived from advocate input (Table 7) and issues of immediate concern (Tables 11-15) were constructive and provided more support for an integrated approach. From the conclusions set out at this stage, environmental health

advocates emerge as seeing themselves as generalists and everyone else as specialists, but this perspective is common to many professions.

Tables 16 to 19 provided a complete array of essential conditions required for the success of community-based action plans from the perspective of the various stakeholders. This is a valuable resource for any organization seeking to develop plans of this nature. The subsequent development of a manual for these plans is a useful endeavour since, "Environmental health is one of the few professional areas still not working off action plans." It was refreshing to note that the manual is not going to be prescriptive and will advocate liberating processes rather than administrative structures. Similar tools have been developed in public health such as APEXPH and PATCH (APHA 2002), and were designed to help communities plan, implement and evaluate health programs and intervention activities.

Chapter 3

Linking local environment and health planning frameworks: a review

From a review of Australian state-based planning frameworks it was determined "that there are four dimensions to designing sustainable integrated environment and health planning frameworks."

The first, coined the CEHAP Paradox, notes problems relating to differences between mandatory legislatively based planning frameworks, which are uniform, generalised and precise, and voluntary community-based frameworks that value diversity, local issues and open-ended processes. It is sensibly argued that certain basic stakeholder-relevant legislative conditions, tempered by the need to preserve community support, are required to develop effective and sustainable community-based environmental health action plans.

The second, the CEHAP Divide, refers to the administrative and mechanistic separation of processes and structures that address environmental and health concerns. The development of two "sub-cultures" is said to have developed in stark contrast to the interdependent nature of their driving principles.

This division is declared to be "artificial" and one of the "strongest barriers to the effective implementation of community action on environment and health issues, and is becoming increasingly serious as the global environmental life-support systems decline." The authors then highlight organizations that exemplify CEHAPS's objectives. The Landcare Plan was noted as comprehensive and sustainable due to the extent of its multiple stakeholders and good integration frameworks.

The suggestion to merge environmental and health services is probably the most controversial one in the book, which is frustrating since one is left wishing for a methodology and some detailed examples of successful mergers. The authors state that environmental and health principles are aligned, but this is problematic. A primary reason for the traditional division between environmental protection and the protection of human wellbeing is to prevent health issues from impinging on the rights of the environment. The authors affirm, "Links between the two programs are rare, even in the same organization". In the U.S., traditional "environmental health" concerns come under a national Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA 2002) while health issues relating directly to humans are managed separately by a national health department. In Australia, environmental protection agencies are state-based despite the existence of national committees such as the National Environmental Protection Council (1992), the Environment Protection and Heritage Council (2001), and the Australian New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council (ANZECC) (EPHC 2002). It is interesting to note that their responsibilities include all those in the USEPA's list with the exception of human health. In Australia, environmental health, nested within public health, looks after this area. It is thus not entirely clear if the suggested merge for Australia concerns environmental protection and public health (containing environmental health) or environmental protection and environmental health.

Chapter 4

Community-based environmental health guidelines for action: a proposal

This proposal addresses the CEHAP Paradox by stating the need for local legislation to support voluntary community frameworks and addresses the CEHAP Divide by calling not only for the linking and combination of environmental and health services, but also for collaboration with other fields including planning, engineering, IT, design, finance and education. It is clear that all these parties are

specialists in their own right. Excellent commonsense guidelines, principles and strategies are finally proposed.

Referencing

Regrettably, there are many referencing errors including the listing of uncited works, multiple listing of identical references, inaccuracies in reference content and missing references.

References

APHA (2002) The Guide to Implementing Model Standards. <http://www.apha.org/ppp/science/guide2.htm>.

USEPA (2002) Human Health. United States Department of the Environmental Protection Agency, <http://www.epa.gov/ebtpages/humanhealth.html>.