



Submission in response to the Australian Government National Preventative Health Strategy consultation

April 2021

1. About us

Australian Library and Information Association

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. On behalf of our 5,000 personal and institutional members, we provide the national voice of the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support. ALIA is the peak body for public, school, university, TAFE and special libraries. We work closely with the Council of Australian University Librarians and National and State Libraries Australia.

ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance

The Australian Public Library Alliance is part of ALIA and represents the interests of the nation's 1500 public libraries. Offering books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, WiFi, PC internet access, learning programs, fun activities and expert staff help, these libraries are a much loved, highly regarded and trusted community resource.

- More than 9 million registered users in 2018-19 and more than 110 million visits to libraries, 51 million visits to library websites.
- More than 273,000 programs eg storytime, Be Connected, attracted over 7.4 million attendees.
- Per capita annual cost of \$52.38, funded by councils, state and territory governments.¹

Libraries play a vital, yet often unsung role in adult literacy and informal lifelong learning. Literacy comes in many forms, including reading, writing, media literacy, digital literacy and consumer health education. Library staff give people the knowledge, tools and guidance to help them find and understand the information they need; to distinguish authentic facts from misinformation, and to enhance people's online experiences, helping library users connect to the virtual world, and providing a safety net for those who are in danger of being left behind as society and government advances 'digital first'.

¹ <https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla-public-library-stats-2018-19.pdf>

ALIA Health Libraries Australia

Librarianship is a trusted profession and across Australia, there is a strong network of specialist health librarians represented by ALIA Health Libraries Australia. We estimate there are between 350 and 400 health libraries in Australia, including hospital, community health, government department, research institute, university, public health, pharmaceutical and biotechnology libraries², employing some 1,250 people. Health librarians comprise an important part of the health information workforce, alongside health information managers and health informatics specialists. Not only are health librarians highly skilled in the field of information and data literacy, their role is also to teach these skills to other professionals in the medical field and to support patients and their families to access complex health information.

2. Our response to the National Preventative Health Strategy

ALIA welcomes the inclusion of 'information and health literacy' in the strategy's approach to 'mobilising a prevention system'. We endorse the statement that 'All Australians should have access to high quality, evidence-based information about how to manage their health and wellbeing through appropriate preventative action across each stage of their life'.

The National Preventative Health draft strategy requires the development of a national platform for health information and support for the health workforce to build their own and others' health literacy (page 37).

- **Creating a national platform for health information is only useful if the public are aware of it and can use it.** We believe there is a critical role here for public libraries to act as intermediaries, helping the less digitally enabled, people whose first language is not English and some of the most vulnerable members of society to access a new resource.
- **Support for the health workforce to develop and share health literacy skills is only achievable if there are information experts on hand to assist.** This is very much within the remit of health librarians and this is recognised in other parts of the world. In the UK, for example, Health Education England³ is the strategic lead for National Health Service (NHS) library services, 'NHS bodies, their staff, learners, patients and the public use the right knowledge and evidence, at the right time, in the right place, enabling high quality decision-making, learning, research and innovation to achieve excellent healthcare and health improvement.

We propose that, in order to achieve the 2030 policy outcomes, the Department of Health explores how libraries can be part of the National Preventative Health Strategy.

² Ref. Kammermann, M. 2016. The Census of Australian Health Libraries and Health Librarians Working Outside the Traditional Library Setting: The Final Report.

³ <https://www.hee.nhs.uk/our-work/knowledge-library-services>

3. Information and health literacy are core business for libraries

Public libraries in Australia provide informal learning opportunities, free, local, at convenient times, from entry level, in community languages, all designed around the needs of library users. Information and health literacy are essential elements of our programs. A few examples:

- Tech Savvy Seniors⁴ is a Telstra program run to improve digital literacy skills for older members of the community, hosted by public libraries in NSW, QLD and Victoria.
- Be Connected⁵ is a national program, funded by the federal government, and delivered through libraries around Australia.
- Digital Health Literacy⁶, including My Health Record training, delivered by ALIA as a program funded by the Australian Digital Health Agency.

Libraries help people identify their gaps and put in place easy, convenient ways to gain the skills they need to navigate the digital environment – something which has become even more critical in this COVID-19 environment.

At a local level, for example, Libraries ACT engages with support groups and playgroups including those that provide support for parents or children with developmental delays or mental health conditions. Connecting these groups with the public library helps open pathways for access to information and health literacy.

The role of health libraries as important sources of information for medical students, clinicians, and other health practitioners; researchers and academics; medical, nursing and allied health students in universities and on clinical placements is well understood. However, health libraries also provide information and education services for hospital-based consumers (patients, families, carers), consumer representatives, volunteers and the broader community, relating to both physical and mental health.

Four of the case studies in the Health Libraries Australia and Health Libraries Inc. HeLIINS research⁷ deal with consumer health literacy in physical and mental health. For example, *Words for Wellbeing* (Ipswich Hospital Library with the local public library) caters to both mental and physical health⁸.

5. Engaging with libraries

ALIA, ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance and ALIA Health Libraries Australia would welcome the opportunity to engage in discussions with the Department of Health about the opportunities for engagement raised in this submission.

⁴ <https://www.telstra.com.au/tech-savvy-seniors>

⁵ <https://beconnected.esafety.gov.au/>

⁶ <https://www.alia.org.au/which-sector-are-you-interested/digital-health-literacy>

⁷ <https://www.alia.org.au/helins-health-libraries-national-standards-outcomes-national-research-project>

⁸ https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/CASE%20STUDY%208_0.pdf

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