

Communicating public health evidence - a successful first year for the PHCC

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Summary

It has been a year since the launch of the Public Health Communication Centre (PHCC) and the new-look *Public Health Expert Briefing*. In this article we reflect on our first year, our impact, and the work ahead. The PHCC has achieved its stated purpose to effectively communicate public health evidence. The increasing number of Briefings, contributing authors, subscriber numbers, and media coverage indicate there is a role for this independent voice. We have covered a wide range of key public health issues and will continue to do so. As we have learned during the debate on our smoke-free laws, communicating high-quality evidence is not enough. We also need to advocate for evidence-informed and transparent decision-making processes as a critical health determinant in Aotearoa NZ and elsewhere.

The PHCC officially launched on the 9th of February 2023. Exactly one year ago, we published our first *Public Health Expert Briefing* article: *Why Aotearoa New Zealand needs a Public Health Communication Centre*.

The PHCC is dedicated to communicating and increasing the impact of public health research and evidence in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). Its independence is supported by generous funding from the philanthropic Gama foundation, and hosting by the University of Otago, Wellington.

The stated purpose of the PHCC is: *To effectively communicate public health research evidence in order to protect and improve the health, well-being, and equity of the people of Aotearoa New Zealand and the health of the environment in which we live.* It is useful to review progress against these goals.

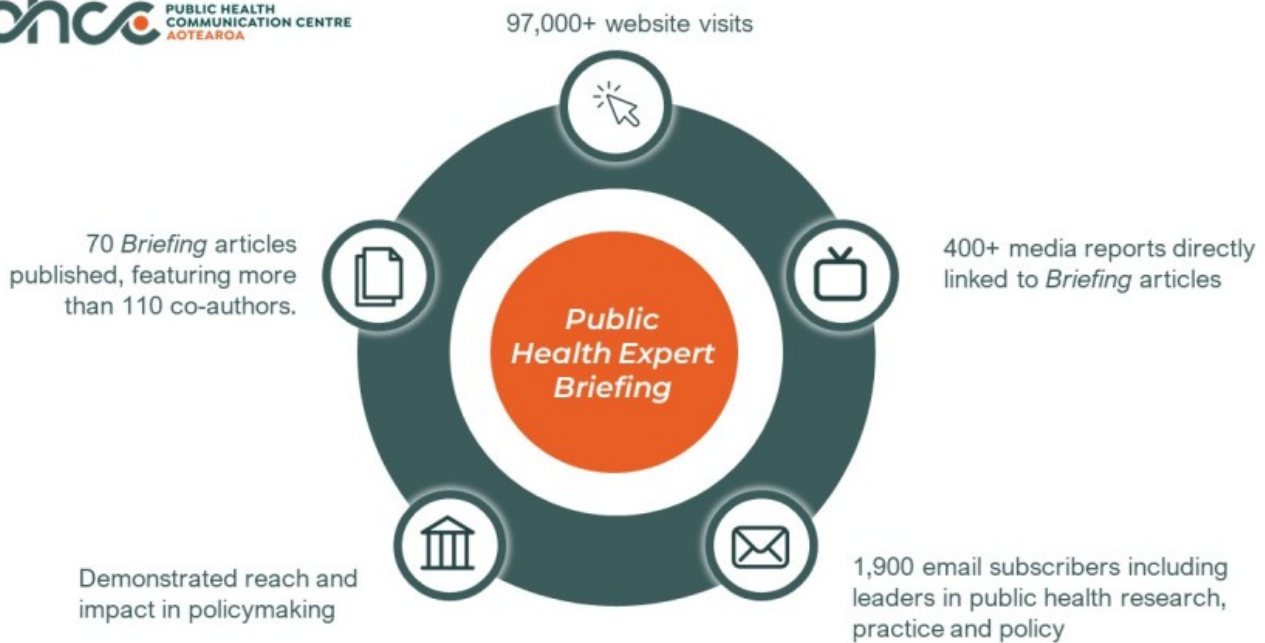
Effective communication of evidence

The PHCC has achieved the first part of its stated purpose to effectively communicate public health research evidence (see Figure). Key indicators include increasing numbers of Briefings, contributing authors, subscribers, and visits to our website. Briefing articles are regularly covered by the media with each article generating an average of 5-6 media stories, further amplifying their impact. They are also widely used by other organisations in different sectors such as social housing, infrastructure, transport, and water management

The 70 Briefings published in the last 12 months have featured expert analysis and commentary from leading public health researchers and practitioners across NZ. They have covered a wide range of topics including rapid responses to emerging public health issues such as Cyclone Gabrielle, Covid-19 waves, and the Queenstown cryptosporidiosis outbreak.

Other areas covered include health determinants, such as tax justice, and tackling child poverty; Health equity, notably improving Māori health equity; Strategic directions, notably the need for long term thinking; Improved interventions, including smoke free laws, Ka Ora Ka Ako/free healthy school lunches and Warmer Kiwi programme; Protecting our environment, including drinking water quality, environment protection generally, and responding to climate change; and public health infrastructure, notably the case for an Aotearoa CDC.

By the numbers — PHCC's first year



Improving health, wellbeing, equity, and our environment

The PHCC has used a range of approaches to actively engage in the policy discussion process. For example, our pre-election series canvassed all the major political parties on policy issues and summarised their responses alongside expert analysis. We also partnered with Health Coalition Aotearoa to hold a pre-election political panel with MPs in Wellington, which had extensive media coverage. The PHCC has provided submissions in response to consultations on public health issues and training courses and seminars on effective public communication and managing disinformation.

The impact of the PHCC on improving health, wellbeing, equity, and our environment is harder to measure than counting outputs. While Briefings are important for raising awareness and ensuring public health stays on the policy agenda, we are mindful that it typically takes long-term systems-level change to improve public health.¹ We have strived to make sure that politicians and policymakers are informed of the major public health challenges we face and their potential solutions. We have addressed important emerging issues and provided articles that summarise the evidence and implications for public health policy and practice.

Supporting transparent and evidence-informed decision-making

As we have learnt during coverage of the proposed repeal of New Zealand's world leading smokefree law, the potential influence of well-organised global interests such as the tobacco industry in opposing effective public health policies is profound. There are multiple reasons why achieving a smoke-free society is a high priority. Keeping the smokefree laws would greatly accelerate the decline in tobacco use with huge health and health equity benefits for NZ.² Achieving a Smokefree Aotearoa is almost certainly the most effective single action to narrow the 7-8 year life expectancy gap for Māori compared with non-Māori.³ The smokefree action plan is also a potential global model to achieve the tobacco 'endgame', and an approach that other countries like the UK have started following.⁴

Tobacco industry influence in obstructing effective public health policies is an example of the commercial determinants of health, which are unfortunately a force that often works against public health interests in many areas including food and alcohol policy, environmental protection and responding to climate change.⁵ Along with communicating high-quality evidence we also need to advocate for evidence-informed and transparent decision-making as a critical health determinant in NZ and elsewhere.⁶

Looking ahead

The PHCC plans to continue promoting public health research and evidence with an expanded breadth and depth of coverage. We are working on a new series of articles which will outline the broader principles of public health (*The public health lens*) and how this perspective can make a tangible difference in the lives of New Zealanders.

We are working to give meaning to our aim of being a Te Tiriti o Waitangi responsive organisation. Late last year we welcomed our new Editor (Tangata Whenua), Emma Rawson-Te Patu (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi, Raukawa and Ngāti Hauā) who is the President Elect of the World Federation of Public Health Associations. She brings rich experience and skills that will enhance the PHCC mahi and mana.

The PHCC is also developing a nationwide representative survey to learn more about New Zealanders' views on specific public health issues and policies, as well as their attitudes about public health as a whole. This knowledge should provide important insights for our work, for the wider sector and policymakers.

What this Briefing adds

- The PHCC has been highly effective in communicating public health evidence – the increasing numbers of Briefing articles, contributors, subscribers, and high media pickup of articles indicates a demand for providing this independent voice.
- The commercial determinants of health are a force that often works against long-term public health interests – along with high-quality evidence we also need to advocate for evidence-informed and transparent decision-making as a critical health determinant in NZ and elsewhere.

How you can assist the work of the PHCC

- To stay up to date on the latest research and commentary from the PHCC, please **subscribe** and get new articles delivered straight to your inbox.
- If you are a public health researcher or practitioner interested in **contributing** a Briefing article, please get in touch.
- If you have any **feedback** on the Centre, the Briefing, and how we can better inform advances in public health, please let us know.

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