

Why health professionals are essential to urban planning

The Heart Foundation may not be the first group you'd think of when putting together a planning board. Nevertheless, our increased understanding of how the built environment affects health, plus growing concerns over escalating rates of chronic disease, explains why new collaborations are so important.

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*Dr Kate White,
Heart Foundation*

Healthy places

As we grapple with the challenge of housing Australia's ever-expanding population, partnerships between health organisations, research institutes and planning bodies become critical, according to Dr Kate White, National Policy Advisor for Active Living at the Heart Foundation.

Kate coordinates high-level policy efforts and submissions to Federal Government, creating policy frameworks and nationwide blueprint documents on behalf of her organisation.

“We certainly have more clout if we join up as coalitions of bodies representing different areas,” says Kate. “Over the years we've found that's been a really effective method to create change.”

The Healthy Built Environment program of the Heart Foundation is an important step in preventing

cardiovascular disease, obesity and weight issues because, as Kate explains, the environments we choose to live in are becoming less conducive to good health.

“We're often a lone voice in built environment meetings from a health perspective,” she concedes. “But we're fortunate to be offered a place at many influential tables in that field, so we use those opportunities where we can.”

Successful partnerships have led to the appearance of the Heart Foundation's health messages in national urban policy, a small but significant win. It's a positive step towards mandating health as a key issue in how we plan, construct and develop our homes and communities.

While walking and active transport are two of the easiest ways we can incorporate physical activity into our lives, not to mention improve the health of our growing population, there are

many challenges. These include a lack of research (at least in Australia) around the long-term impact of increased walkability, our reliance on greenfield developments situated on the fringes, and our scepticism around increasing density.

“Greenfield developments are a really troubled space. It's profitable for developers but for infrastructure, it's a sink hole,” says Kate.

“We'd rather see improved density in urban and peri-urban areas because the benefits here are multiple. Infrastructure services can be networked more efficiently, such as connecting with existing public transport options and building on and extending green spaces for health and recreation.

“But the density issue within Australia is still in a juvenile form. We don't yet have a psyche to deal with density.

“We're still seeking lifestyles that are about autonomous space. It's a discourse that needs to be matured.”

Many countries are ahead of Australia in recognising this connection. Even a geographically vast country like the US has finally put walkability on the national agenda, calling for national health promotion around this topic.

In Australia, the Heart Foundation is a partner in the University of Melbourne's Centre for Research Excellence (CRE) to undertake research exploring the link between built form and healthier outcomes.

“The CRE is a hothouse for research generation and that then needs to be translated to a broader audience in various streams and capacities,” she adds. “We're going to play a part in that.

“I think we're moving in the right direction, it's just a very slow progression.

Many developers are yet to see the value of operating on a greater public good platform: of creating places for people; ones that improve health and wellbeing, rather than simply subdividing into lots for cookie-cutter housing provision.”

Partnering with planners has allowed the Heart Foundation to encourage a sector of the industry to engage in thinking beyond the standard schemes. Sadly, some urban designs are watered down by the time they're constructed.

At a state level, Kate has observed positive steps in Adelaide, South Australia, where they're retrofitting the city to promote increased density and active living. Innovation for healthy urban design can also be seen in the regional Victorian cities of Geelong and Bendigo.

Western Australia is leading the charge with Healthy Active by Design, working within the planning schemes to recognise health as a key part of development from the outset, “getting information out there that's going to fundamentally shift the way that people perceive new developments should be built”.

While most inner-city communities are serviced with existing infrastructure, the Heart Foundation is committed to reaching remote and regional areas through a walking program that shows it's possible to be active wherever you live.

“The geographics of addressing walking and walkability in cities versus remote or rural territories present vastly different issues,” explains Kate. “Especially when infrastructure is provided by government via funding that can be limited or lacking in some areas.

“It is a difficult issue to resolve.

There are no certainties.

“Even in our coalitions we have to constantly work at lobbying for health to be on the table. So many meta-issues are being pushed to one side in Australia, our ageing population, climate change, increasing population and our capacity to cope with all this.” Health is innate in addressing all of these complex problems.

Kate describes international guru of urban design Jan Gehl as “brilliant” in his maturity around placemaking. She believes he thinks beyond targets and tick boxes when it comes to providing infrastructure and, instead, considers the sense of place and people's experience of it and its lifespan, for children and older people too.

“Placemaking is an art form that requires creativity and a sense of imagination,” she says. “I think we're limited at the moment, because we need to value it first.” — ●



ABOUT DR KATE WHITE

Dr Kate White is a socio-environmental geographer with a background in science, environmental policy and health promotion. Representing an unusual blend of environmental and health advocacy, her expertise in complex systems and resilience theory has proved valuable in promoting policy of healthy urban environments. Her work for the Heart Foundation over the past five years has helped cement the organisation's position as the leading health promotion voice within urban planning.



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Meet the founder of the Centre for Research Excellence, Professor Billie Giles-Corti, who is a national advisor in the built environment space.