



Minute

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Date: 14/12/04

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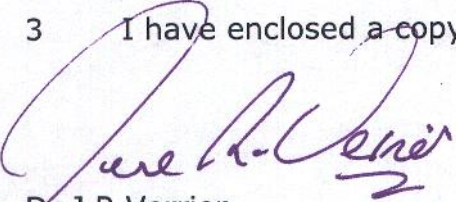
Ms Hilary Penfold QC
Secretary

**Response to correspondence on Parliamentary Library publication
'Critical but stable: Australia's response to an infectious disease
outbreak' no.3 2004-2005 ISSN 1449-8464**

1 On the 25 November Dr Greg Stewart, Director General - Population Health and Chief Health Officer of the NSW Health Department wrote to you outlining his concerns about the above Parliamentary Library paper. Similarly, on the 26 November the Secretary of the Department of Health and Ageing, Jane Halton, wrote to you with concerns about this paper.

2 Attached is a draft letter of response to Dr Stewart and another for Ms Halton. The authors, Nigel Brew and Kate Burton, have investigated each claim in detail and, in consultation with their Directors and myself, have drafted this response.

3 I have enclosed a copy of the original Research Brief for your information.


Dr J R Verrier
Assistant Secretary
Information & Research Services



DPS ref: "ref. no."

XX December 2004

Dr Greg Stewart
Deputy Director General – Population Health
and Chief Health Officer
NSW Department of Health
73 Miller Street
NORTH SYDNEY NSW 2059

Dear Dr Stewart:

'Critical but stable: Australia's capacity to respond to an infectious disease outbreak' 16 November 2004, No.3 2004-05 ISSN 1449-8464

1 Thank you for your letter dated 25 November 2004 regarding the abovementioned Research Brief from the Parliamentary Library. As you may be aware, the Library prides itself on the high quality of its research and publications and we are always pleased to receive feedback and to have any errors of fact brought to our attention. I am informed that this brief, like all others in the series, underwent a stringent quality control process which included review by very senior external referees with intimate knowledge of the subject at hand.

2 I note your recommendation that the paper be withdrawn on account of your concerns regarding its methodology, its content in relation to NSW Health and Commonwealth-State relations, and its Conclusion.

3 Let me first address your comments regarding the methodology. The introduction outlines quite clearly what the Brief is and what it is not. It is research primarily conducted by interviews with a range of Australian professionals in the field. The selection of interviewees was guided by the Australian literature and the advice of experts in the field. While the most senior people were approached, the final list was primarily limited by people's time and availability and the need to produce timely advice to the Parliament from open-source information. As an indicator of the difficulty experienced by the authors, at best they were able to secure interviews with some on a not-for-attribution basis, and at worst not at all. For example – despite several attempts, the authors were unable to secure an interview with the Australian Health Disaster Management Policy Committee. Your office was contacted in April at the very start of the project, but the authors were told that you were very busy prior to your June leave and an undertaking was made to get back to them before you left. Unfortunately this did not happen.

4 Nevertheless, as listed in the appendix, a wide range of other key players engaged in Australia's response to disease and biological threats - practitioners, policy makers and academics - were interviewed. This methodology was consistent with the expressed aim of the paper – 'to raise issues for discussion and highlight both the positive and negative aspects of Australia's current

emergency health responses'. The methodology used was qualitative, not a quantitative survey based-approach. The questions were derived from open-source information sources including the media and the respondents themselves. Like all Briefs prepared by the Parliamentary Library it was not intended as an academic treatise or a comprehensive international literature review. Rather it was designed to be a timely contribution to public policy debate representing the voices of the professionals who are engaged in the development of Australia's response to infectious diseases and who are well versed in the strengths and weaknesses of the system as it stands.

5 Regarding representation of NSW Health's activities in this area, the Brief was not intended to provide a state-by-state overview of programmes but to highlight both the positive and negative aspects of current arrangements. It therefore highlights NSW's flu pandemic plan, although on the advice of the NSW Health Counter Disaster Unit, the authors removed a largely-positive paragraph summarising the outcome of a recent exercise. The Brief also records that Commonwealth-State relations are 'cordial in practice' and concludes that the Commonwealth-State structures would result in an 'adequate response'.

6 In relation to the media's concentration on the negatives, while it is unfortunate that it is in the nature of the media to concentrate on the sensational, the Library cannot be held responsible for what the media reports or the manner in which they report it. Like all our Research Briefs, this one presents a balanced and impartial approach to a difficult and important matter of public policy.

7 Regarding your concerns about the Conclusion, the authors' stated aim was not to make recommendations but to identify a number of issues for policy consideration and discussion. This in no way precludes consideration of other evidence or research. This presentation of alternative views in policy debate is totally consistent with the role of the Parliamentary Library and is well accepted by our clients who generally wish to be informed about different opinions and ideas. Indeed, since the publication of the brief, the authors have received a number of favourable comments from a range of people including academic and departmental sources, about its contribution to this issue.

8 On balance I therefore do not believe that there is an argument that the brief be withdrawn from circulation. However, we will consider whether there is scope to include any more of the background information you have provided in any new edition of the Brief.

Yours sincerely

Hilary Penfold QC
Secretary
Department of Parliamentary Services



DPS ref: "ref. no."

XX December 2004

Ms Jane Halton
Secretary
Department of Health and Ageing
GPO Box 9848
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Ms Halton

'Critical but stable: Australia's capacity to respond to an infectious disease outbreak' 16 November 2004, No.3 2004-05 ISSN 1449-8464

1 Thank you for your letter dated 26 November 2004 regarding the abovementioned Research Brief from the Parliamentary Library. As you rightly note, the Library prides itself on the high quality of its research and publications and we are always pleased to receive feedback and to have any errors of fact brought to our attention. I am informed that this Brief, like all others in the series, underwent a stringent quality control process which included review by very senior external referees with intimate knowledge of the subject at hand.

2 I wish to correct a misunderstanding that the Department of Health and Ageing was not consulted in the preparation of this Brief. I am informed by the authors that their attempt to seek input from your Department was only partly successful. In particular, they note that they approached the Branch Manager for the then Communicable Diseases Branch (we note your correction that it is now known as the Biosecurity and Disease Control Branch) on 4 March 2004. She initially agreed to an interview but later withdrew without explanation. The authors also approached the office of the Chief Medical Officer (CMO). He also was unavailable, but his staff directed the authors to the Deputy Chief Medical Officer. An interview was then conducted on 26 March 2004. His input was most valuable in shaping the overall structure of the Research Brief.

3 Thank you for the details you have provided regarding the operations of the Biosecurity and Disease Control Branch, the Department's internal Chemical, Biological and Radiological Committee, the Department's involvement in training exercises, the CMO's wide ranging powers under the Quarantine Act and the role of the Australian Health Disaster Management Policy Committee. It should be noted however, that it was not the intention of the authors to provide detail of all government programmes and activities. Their stated aim was to highlight both the positive and negative aspects of current arrangements. Consequently while the Brief may not detail all these activities, it does include many positive comments and observations about the Commonwealth's activities which are consistent with the information you have provided. At the same time it also highlights potential problem areas.

4 In response to issues you raise relating to methodology and scope, I offer the following comments. As identified in the appendix, the authors consulted a

wide range of key players engaged in Australia's response to disease and biological threats - practitioners, policy makers and academics. Others were also approached but were unavailable to be interviewed in the time available to produce this Brief. This methodology was consistent with the expressed aim of the paper - 'to raise issues for discussion and highlight both the positive and negative aspects of Australia's current emergency health responses'. The methodology used was qualitative, based on questions informed by open-source information sources including the media and the respondents themselves. Like all Briefs from the Parliamentary Library it was not intended as an academic treatise or a comprehensive international literature review. Rather it was designed to be a timely contribution to public policy debate. The decision not to attribute comments was made on the grounds of consistency as not all respondents agreed to attribution. In their assessment, the authors regarded the opinions of these contributors as no less valuable.

5 The authors welcome the additional information you have provided, particularly the information regarding the Australian Health Disaster Management Policy Committee, an agency with which they had been unsuccessful in securing an interview. They will consider it for inclusion in any new edition of the Research Brief.

Yours sincerely

Hilary Penfold QC
Secretary
Department of Parliamentary Services