Public policy and
physical activity: A South
Australian study

Colin James MacDougall
BA (Hons) MA

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, governments and interest groups in Australia have focussed on increasing the participation of the population in regular, moderate physical activity. Changes in thinking about the benefits, measurement and methods of promoting physical activity have led to debates about the most effective public policies. Options for public policies frequently reflect fundamental differences in values, paradigms and research methods. The literature review concludes that moves towards designing strategies for physical activity promotion from a new public health perspective are in their infancy.

The thesis asks three general questions in a South Australian context:

1. What are the physical activity gaps between social groups and how do these gaps relate to health and the other benefits of physical activity?

2. What are the constraints on choices and what needs to be done to make the choices of people to increase moderate physical activity easier? How do ordinary people theorise about constraints on choices?

3. What is the role of the social environment in relation to moderate physical activity choices and what needs to be done to ensure supportive social environments? How do ordinary people theorise about supportive social environments?

The methodology is consistent with the social constructionist paradigm and combines quantitative, qualitative, case study and document analysis methods.

The results show that physical activity frequently become the province of different sectors of society at different times. Recent case studies demonstrate that policies about how governments organise their services lead to more fundamental changes than specific health policies.

A quantitative study in Adelaide, South Australia, demonstrates associations between lower levels of physical activity and demographic factors, lower self reported health status, low social connections and low satisfaction levels with community facilities. Qualitative studies show how people use ordinary theories to speak about health and physical activity which either are consistent, or differ from, experts’ theories. Qualitative analysis also explains links between levels of physical activity and setting or environmental characteristics involving where people live, how they move around and how they relate to each other. Changing these characteristics involves collaboration between the public health sector and others such as urban planning, transport, criminology, education, recreation and sport. The thesis develops a mixed scanning approach that distinguishes between policy processes at the local and the national levels to propose how to place policies designed to increase moderate physical activity higher on the relevant policy agendas.
The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for photocopying and loan.

Signed  
Date