

# 1 Introduction

Chronic diseases are a major health challenge in Australia and other parts of the world. Prominent among these are heart and circulatory problems, several cancers, diabetes, arthritis and depression. Most chronic diseases are not immediately life threatening, but they contribute to much illness and disability over the course of life and eventually to a large proportion of deaths. Many of the chronic diseases can be prevented early by tackling some well-known risk factors. Others can be managed effectively to avoid further complications.

Regular surveillance and monitoring is a central plank in any strategy aimed at prevention and management of chronic diseases and their risk factors. All policy initiatives for chronic disease prevention and management should be supported and underpinned by timely and accurate data.

Surveillance and monitoring of chronic diseases is made difficult by their complex origins, long periods between exposure to a risk factor and symptoms, and lack of one-to-one correspondence between risk factors and disease outcomes. Several risk factors may contribute to more than one chronic disease. The disease outcomes also show significant variation, with many chronic diseases often interacting with other diseases, conditions and risk factors causing illness and death.

In addition to mortality, morbidity and disability statistics, surveillance data on prevalence of risk factors are required for effective planning, implementation and evaluation of preventive policies and programs for chronic diseases. There is also a need to integrate information from a range of administrative and non-administrative data sources. To ensure comparability over time and across locations, standardisation and harmonisation of data collections and their analysis is also necessary.

Any surveillance and monitoring of chronic diseases and their risk factors needs to consider all these issues in totality rather than by a piecemeal approach. However, given the wide range of issues, priorities must be established in data development, analysis and dissemination. As a first step in this process, the National Public Health Information Working Group (NPHIWG) convened a workshop on issues and priorities in chronic disease surveillance and monitoring in Australia. The workshop, which was hosted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in conjunction with the then Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, now the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA), was held in Canberra on 8-9 November 2001. Among those attending the workshop were senior policy makers, health information specialists, nutritionists, epidemiologists, clinicians and representatives of non-government organisations.

This report describes the outcomes of the workshop as well as provides a summary of the workshop proceedings.