The public health legacy of the late Gough Whitlam

Edward Gough Whitlam, Prime Minister of Australia from 1972-1975, died on 21 October age 98. Significant changes to public health policy came from his prime ministership including the creation of Medibank, which preceded Medicare, and the Community Health Progam, which left an indelible mark on Victoria.

Medibank, Australia's first national health insurance scheme, followed Whitlam's1972 election campaign speech, in which he said: "I personally find quite unacceptable a system whereby the man who drives my Commonwealth car in Sydney pays twice as much for the same family cover as I have, not despite the fact that my income is four or five times higher than his, but precisely because of my higher income."

The Australian Medical Association and the General Practitioners' Society staunchly opposed the 1973 parliamentary bill to create Medibank. The bill was repeatedly blocked by the Senate before being passed into legislation after the 1974 double dissolution and subsequent return of the Whitlam Government. Medibank began operating on 1 October 1975, just weeks before the Whitlam government was dismissed. The new Fraser Government largely repealed Medibank, which the Hawke Government later reinstated as Medicare in 1983.

The Whitlam Government pioneered the national **Community Health Program** in 1973 to shift the emphasis of healthcare from treatment to prevention, to provide an alternative to general practice, and to reduce the community's dependence on hospitals.

The Commonwealth offered funding to the states on a cost-sharing basis, seeking their proposals for new community health centres, similar to those established in Britain, Sweden and the United States. Staffed by multidisciplinary teams, these centres were to deliver primary care to local populations, particularly in areas where health services were scarce.

But the Victorian government opposed the Community Health Program and refused to participate in cost-sharing. The Commonwealth responded by providing funds directly to community groups, who established Victoria's first community health services. The state government later agreed to fund the program through cost-sharing but Victoria's independently-established community health centres continued to operate at arm's length from government.

After the Whitlam Government was dismissed in 1975, the Commonwealth cut back its contribution to the Community Health Program. Funding was later restored by the Hawke Government but, without central direction, community health services varied significantly between the states – a situation which remains to this day.

Source: Palmer G and Short S Health Care and Public Policy second edition, Macmillan Education Australia 1994