Background

Royal College of Nursing, *Australia* agrees with the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UNCESCR, 2007) statement that highlights the following interrelated and essential elements on the right to health. These elements are related to health care and facilities, goods and services as well asprograms and include:

- *Availability.* Functioning and available in sufficient quantity. At a minimum, this includes safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, health facilities including hospitals and clinics, trained health personnel and essential drugs;

- *Accessibility.* Physically and economically affordable. They must be provided to all on a non-discriminatory basis. Health information should be freely accessible to all recognising the importance of confidentiality of individual's specific data;

- *Acceptability*. Must be respectful of medical ethics, and culturally sensitive and appropriate;

- *Quality.* Must be scientifically and medically appropriate and of good quality. At a minimum, this requires skilled health personnel, scientifically approved and unexpired drugs and hospital equipment, safe water and adequate sanitation.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 1947,para. 3) Constitution highlights that individuals and communities have the right to the "*highest attainable health for all.*" All individuals should be considered as equal and therefore have the right to health and well-being which includes the fundamentals of food, clothing, housing, medical care and social services (UNHR,1948) The United Nations Health Care and Human Rights (UNHCHR, 2000) reports that "*the right to health embraces a wide range of socio-economic factors that promote conditions in which people can lead a healthy life, and extends to the underlying determinants of health, such as food and nutrition, housing, access to safe and portable water and adequate sanitation, safe and healthy working conditions, and a healthy environment.*"

It is recognised that whilst these underpinning principles for good health and well-being for individuals and communities area right, currently not all individuals worldwide receive equal and appropriate rights and more work needs to occur to achieve these outcomes. (Hunt &Backman, 2008)

In Australia, the National Preventative Health Strategy, *Australia: The Healthiest Country by 2020*key strategic directions are: shared responsibility, act early and throughout life, engagement, influence markets and develop connected and coherent policies, reduce inequities, Indigenous Australians – contribute to 'Close the Gap'; and refocus primary health into prevention. (Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, 2009)

WHO(2007) reported that "*The health status of the population is largely determined by factors outside the health sector – such as socio-economic social and environmental factors affecting life-style and behaviours. Health policy should, therefore, aim at improving the functioning of public health services and health systems, as well as interacting with policies and decision-making in sectors other than health for the improvement of health.*"

Social policy in health should reflect a healthier population that recognises the key elements of human rights with the focus of decreasing inequalities. The promotion of a healthy population by reducing inequalities in health should comprise of a broad approach of all government sectors including health, well-being, equity and economics when developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies in

health.(WHO,2010) Policies should be responsive to the changing needs of the population demographics for example ageing, urbanisation and increase in chronic disease whilst at the same time being responsive to world events such as natural disasters and the increasing pandemics such as avian flu and SARS. (WHO, 2008)

Rationale

Social policy in a just system acknowledges the equal rights of individuals to health and strives to achieve accessibility to appropriate health care for all, within a context which aims to achieve environments supportive of health.

Social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental factors are inseparable determinants of health. Effective implementation of equitable social policy can positively influence and balance these factors to advantage the health and wellbeing of all people and to ensure that health risks are not disproportionately experienced in any sector of the community.

Fundamental to the formulation of social policy is the capacity for individuals and communities to participate in decision making, regarding all aspects of health care. Individuals and communities have a right to information in order to make informed health choices; engage in debate; contribute to decisions about factors which affect health, health care policy, care provision and services, particularly when cost restraint is necessary.

The formulation of social policy in relation to health should be founded in the spirit of justice and equity, guided by the principles of the Alma Ata Declaration on Primary Health Careand the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion and directed towards:

- building healthy public policy;
- creating environments supportive of good health;
- strengthening community participation in decision making;
- developing personal skills for maintaining health; and
- re-orienting health services towards to a primary health care focus of prevention; and
- health maintenance.

Royal College of Nursing, Australia resolves to:

Promote this statement to all members of RCNA and seek their support in encouraging nurses to:

- promotes the principles expressed in this position statement in the interests of the health and wellbeing of the individual and community;
- identify and bring issues to the notice of governments, health professionals and the community, formulate recommendations and lobby to resolve situations for which appropriate policy development and implementation could affect positive changes in health and wellbeing; influence national health policy, planning and evaluation processes through representation and advocacy principles of social justice.

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