

Epilogue

THE GLOBAL HEALTH AND FOREIGN POLICY articles in this issue of the Journal leave us in no doubt that the answer to the question posed in the Symposium title is an emphatic “Yes”! There *is* a great deal of scope for Australian engagement.

Symposium participants outlined some practical steps to strengthen the links between health and foreign policy by:

- broadening the public policy agenda;
- engaging civil society more closely in the policy debate; and
- improving public understanding of global health issues.

What is needed to develop and advance this agenda? There was overwhelming support from Symposium participants for the creation of an Australian Coalition for Global Health (name yet to be determined). The broad purpose of such a Coalition would be to advocate for (i) considering health implications in developing Australian foreign policy and trade agreements, and (ii) reducing global health inequalities.

It was agreed during the Symposium that, to achieve this goal, a small coordination group should be formed, which would comprise participants from non-government organisations, academia, the private sector and interested individuals. Nominations have been sought for this coordination group, the purpose of which would be to advise on the creation of the Coalition and the organisational arrangements underpinning it, as well as to examine possible funding options, agree on an appropriate name, develop terms of reference, and formulate a work program. The coordination group will meet over the next few months, with a potential launching of the Coalition by mid 2004.

The strategic pathway the Coalition adopts to argue the case for increased importance of health in foreign policy will

be critical. As articles in this issue highlight, there are many ways of viewing the prism.

One current strategy promotes national self-interest, with a particular focus on topical issues such as controlling the international spread of infectious diseases and bioterrorism. Such a strategy may resonate with governments; however, there is a risk that broader global health considerations would be constrained by this limited agenda.

Conversely, while a strong humanitarian and human rights-based approach might be more in tune with the beliefs of many of those advocating greater consideration of health in foreign policy, such arguments have not held much sway in the Australian political context in recent years.

A promising pathway is proposed by McInnes (*page 168*).¹ He argues that, in an environment in which national boundaries are of decreasing importance, “narrow conceptions of the national interest have become less relevant, and a more internationalist and communitarian perspective is required”. This strategy treads a fine line by arguing that Australia’s national interest is best served if our Asian and Pacific neighbours enjoy good health, robust economies, and good security.

What is evident is that, unless a strong, active and broad-based advocacy group is formed in Australia, the considerable enthusiasm and desire for action evident at the September 2003 Global Health and Foreign Policy Symposium will dissipate.

Michael A Reid

Director, Policy and Practice Division
Institute for International Health, Sydney, NSW
mreid@iuh.usyd.edu.au

1. McInnes CJ. Looking beyond the national interest: reconstructing the debate on health and foreign policy. *Med J Aust* 2004; 180: 168-170. □