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## **Upskilling the public health workforce in communicable disease control**

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# Communicable Diseases Intelligence

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# Upskilling the public health workforce in communicable disease control

Michelle McPherson, Silvana Bettiol, Nicola Stephens

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There has been much discussion about increasing the public health workforce responsible for communicable disease control, including the recent announcement to establish a national communicable diseases control centre.<sup>1–4</sup> In several Australian jurisdictions, including Tasmania, there were not enough workers trained in communicable disease control to meet the needs of the COVID-19 response. Despite surging experienced health workers from within and outside of public health, many did not have background or context in communicable disease control. In this letter, we describe our efforts in addressing this shortfall.

In September 2021, whilst seconded to the Tasmanian Public Health Emergency Operations Centre (PHEOC) and upon request from the Public Health Directorate, we delivered a one-day introductory session on surveillance, outbreak investigation and response to the multi-disciplinary PHEOC team. More than 80 attended with overwhelming positive feedback, and many requests for further training targeted at the broad range of skills required within Health Protection. This led us to develop a modular training pathway at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) comprising a four-day Outbreak Management short course and a Graduate Certificate in Health Protection that is nested into the existing Master of Public Health. The short course can be completed as a standalone training opportunity, or with the completion of assessment, as our Outbreak Management Unit. This, plus a new Public Health Surveillance unit, and existing Communicable Diseases Epidemiology and Environmental Health units, make up the Graduate Certificate in Health Protection.

Establishing a new course, at a time when many universities were reducing their offerings,<sup>5,6</sup> required a strong business case. This, plus fast-tracking the university approval processes and developing the content, took us several months. Having strong support from Tasmanian Public Health Services (PHS) and champions within UTAS was invaluable, and we launched the Graduate Certificate in Health Protection in Semester 1 of 2021. The first Outbreak Management short course was run in February 2021; the first online Outbreak Management Unit delivered in Semester 1 of 2021; and the first Public Health Surveillance unit was run in Semester 2 of 2021.

The short course has transitioned from exclusively Tasmanian PHS staff using a face-to-face delivery in Hobart, to delivery in Melbourne and Sydney and as an online workforce training opportunity to organisational cohorts, mostly public health units. Similarly, most of the initial enrolments in the Graduate Certificate were from PHS, but enrolments have expanded within Tasmania and to other jurisdictions. About half of the short course participants have enrolled in the Graduate Certificate. Evaluations have highlighted that the content—which includes real-life examples, interactive formats, peer-to-peer learning and practical tasks authentic to the workplace—is applicable to those currently working in communicable disease units across different roles, as well as in other disciplines.

Developing this modular suite of training opportunities during a pandemic is testament to our can-do attitudes and our long-term experiences as public health practitioners and educators. The relevance to a range of participants,

including government workers, hospital and residential-care staff, allied health, general practitioners and nurses, through to executive management and emergency response workers, has effectively targeted the public health workforce responsible for communicable disease control.

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