

2. Appoint a National Chief Paediatrician to provide clinical leadership

Australia's federal system of government means that responsibility for child health and wellbeing services, programs and policies fall across multiple agencies within different tiers of government. This disparate system creates challenges, including at times a lack of clear and cohesive focus on child health. Appointing a National Chief Paediatrician, who would work with colleagues across the States and Territories, as well as the National Children's Commissioner, would ensure that a strong public voice for children's health and wellbeing is articulated at all levels of government.

The role of Paediatricians is crucial in the management of a child's development and behaviour with a significant proportion of paediatric consultations in Australia relating to issues with development and behaviour, which can precede lifelong mental health problems. A National Chief Paediatrician will provide expertise to the COVID-19 recovery plan noting [that many children experienced a significant increase of mental health difficulties following a second lockdown.](#)

Specific roles that the National Chief Paediatrician may complete include:

- Provide clinical leadership and high-level policy advice to the Minister, Executive and staff within the Department of Health to ensure the needs of children and young people are embedded in health policies and programs.
- Work with stakeholders to promote child health, development and wellbeing to identify areas of unmet need for children and young people.
- Work with Commonwealth, State and Territory colleagues to ensure a strong focus on child health and wellbeing and represent a strong 'in-government' advocate for children and young people to be considered in developing policies and programs.
- Engage with all Commonwealth and State/Territory policies and programs that have a potential impact on children and young people across all governments and sectors.
- Work with the National Children's Commissioner to promote a whole of government approach to child health, wellbeing and welfare.
- Co-Chair, with the National Children's Commissioner, the proposed National COVID-19 Taskforce.

The role of Chief Paediatrician and similar roles exist in some states in Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand has appointed a Chief Advisor for Child and Youth Health which fulfils a similar role. Clinical leaders have [been shown in various contexts](#) to be linked to high quality and performing health systems, potentially because of the greater focus on patient care and a deep, lived, understanding of the many varied factors which impact health systems.

Functionally, the role would sit well within the office of the Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and provide expert advice and input in relation to child health and wellbeing issues potentially impacted by proposed Commonwealth policies, programs and legislation. Currently, some of this responsibility lies within the scope of the CMO. However, the CMO role is a very broad leadership role which is commonly held by a public health medicine specialist. A Commonwealth Chief Paediatrician would complement this, but be a strong, dedicated, 'in-government' advocate for the health and wellbeing of children and young people, rather than merely considering children and young people as part of the entire lifespan. A Commonwealth Chief Paediatrician would also assist in linking and integrating policy and programs on children's health with other key portfolio areas, including education and social services for example, to enable delivery of better outcomes.

The Commonwealth Government has recognised the need for additional specialist clinical leadership within the Chief Medical Officer realm. Specifically, in 2008 the government appointed a [Chief Nursing and Midwifery Officer](#) to advise the Government on matters related to nursing and midwifery, including workforce development and the development of primary standards in the area. This role also functions as a national, Government-endorsed, voice for nurses and the nursing community. More recently, in response to concerns arising from COVID-19, the Commonwealth Government appointed a [Deputy Chief Medical Officer for mental health](#). This role, currently held by a psychiatrist, recognises the importance that the Australian Government places on mental health. The role has helped strengthen the coordinated medical and mental health responses and decision-making to the COVID-19 pandemic. Should a Chief Paediatrician role be created, the role would play a similar and broader function for children's needs, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Further reading:

RACP Position Statement: [Inequities in Child Health](#), which recommended the Federal Government:

1. Report annually against AIHW's Children's Headline Indicators to keep governments accountable.
2. Develop Equitable Access Indicators for children accessing health services and report on performance annually.
3. Appoint a national Chief Paediatrician to provide clinical leadership in paediatric healthcare policies and programs.
4. Immediately reinstate the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council subcommittee on child and youth health.
5. Fund, establish and maintain a national collaborative approach on research on inequities in child health.