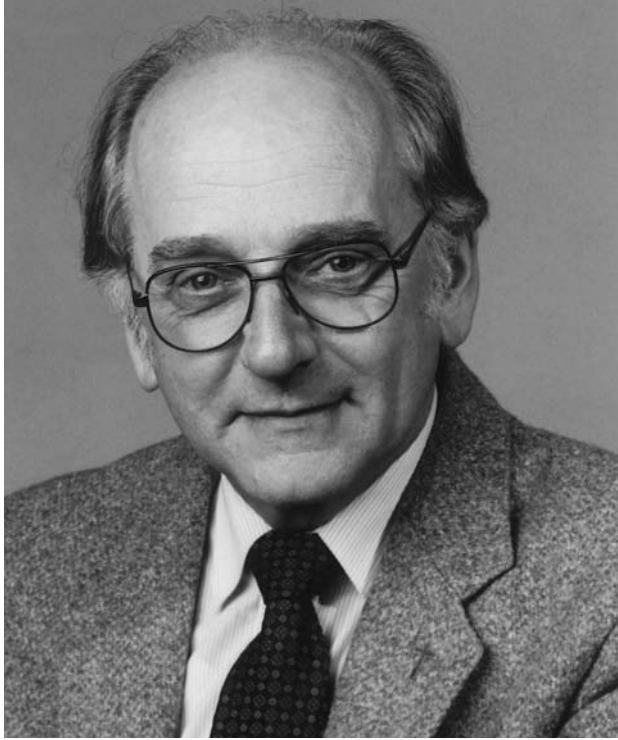


on D'Arcy Wood



As the longest-serving member of the AIHW's Ethics Committee, Rev. Dr D'Arcy Wood has not only seen AIHW Directors and Committee Chairs come and go since 1993, but has also witnessed some significant shifts in ethical approaches to various research issues and projects.

'As well as focusing on issues of privacy and informed consent, the Committee at times discusses the social context of particular research. I find particularly interesting the differences between Western and Indigenous approaches to ethical matters. We have seen a very positive move in recent years towards respecting Indigenous culture and values. For example, for a long time Aboriginal people were supposed to conform to Western society, and were not encouraged to develop their own culture. Now the differences between the two approaches are better understood and respected, for example, the fact that Indigenous societies put community values first, whereas in Western societies the emphasis is on individual human rights.'

Dr Wood thinks that we need to be very careful when discussing the possibility of an absolute, or universal, approach to ethical questions. 'The more abstract you become in ethics, the more general you get. Cultures differ, and we are more careful now with ethical issues. In general terms there are universal ethics, but they encompass various ethical systems that all have to be taken into account. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights would probably be very different if it were written now, and not some 50 years ago, in times when it was assumed that ethical values were universal and built into all human societies.'

A theme Dr Wood has always been particularly interested in is the need for two-way traffic between theory and practice. 'If there is dissonance between theory and practice in ethical matters, then theory needs to be adjusted. Norms have to be flexible. A good example is the right to life, which pretty much rules out any form of warfare, or taking of life in order to save another life, as in some cases of mothers and babies. If you start to apply rigid norms to these situations, then you are in immediate trouble.'

'I think that there are a number of prima-facie moral rights, but they need to be applied in combination with other rights and goods in each particular situation.'

As the Minister of Religion member on the AIHW's Ethics Committee, Dr Wood is confident that although some people fear that those with strong religious beliefs will be inflexible in ethical matters, this need not be the case.

'All ethics should be grounded in actual personal, social, economic and political circumstances. Ministers of religion are not removed from people and everyday life. Many people do not have religious beliefs nowadays, and have misconceptions about ministers of religion.'

'Ministers of religion have very strong connections with people through their work and are trained to deal with personal and family problems. On the other hand, they are trained in using a theological framework, have a strong ethical background, and do not tend to judge a situation by the lowest common denominator.'

Dr Wood's longstanding interest in ethics comes from the time when, uncertain as to what career path to follow during his last year in school, he decided to study something general at university—and did a combined Honours degree in history and philosophy at the University of Melbourne.

'I particularly enjoyed the ethics component of my philosophy studies, as it had to do with universal issues of right and wrong, values and conduct. While my professional life has taken other directions, I have followed up my study in ethics in two ways. The first was to write an MA thesis on the relationship between theory and practice in ethics, and the second was to become a member of the AIHW Ethics Committee about 10 years ago.'

Born to Methodist missionary parents, Dr Wood was brought up in the church. 'While doing the compulsory three-month military service as an undergraduate, it came to me strongly that I was being called to take on the role of a minister. In 1959 I started theological studies at the Melbourne College of Divinity. I was 22 at the time, quite an early starter by modern standards.'

Dr Wood obtained his Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1962, but wasn't ordained for a few years, since he decided to do postgraduate studies. 'At that time there were not many opportunities to pursue that in Australia, so I chose to go to Princeton Theological Seminary to do a PhD in Doctrinal Theology.'

After four years in the USA, Dr Wood and his young family returned to Australia in 1966. He was ordained into the Methodist Ministry in Melbourne and took up his first parish appointment, for three years, in Ballarat.

Dr Wood's career then turned to theological teaching, chiefly in Adelaide, but also to some extent in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. 'Although it may sound immodest of me, I think I have a natural gift for teaching. I started teaching as an undergraduate student and found that I had the ability to communicate with students. I combined theological research with teaching for 15 years in Adelaide. The responsibility of preparing graduates and some undergraduates for pastoral ministry in local churches is a heavy one, but one I enjoyed.'

Dr Wood's teaching also took him into the field of liturgy, and then into church music.

His interest in liturgy was put to practical use in preparing worship resources for the Uniting Church, which was formed in 1977 and needed new resources as it entered a new era. 'For 13 years I chaired the relevant Commission and we produced substantial resource books. It is satisfying to know that the material which my colleagues and I wrote is currently used week by week at weddings and funerals, and in homes, as well as in Sunday worship.'

Dr Wood eventually gave up teaching to return to parish work, first in Canberra (City Church, Civic) and then in Melbourne. While in Canberra he also served as National President of the Uniting Church, travelling extensively throughout Australia and overseas.

He was also eager to dedicate more time to music, one of his life's great passions.

'My parents encouraged their six children to study music and I began piano at the age of eight. Later I studied organ, and for a short time the cello. My father was a very good pianist, but as he got older, his beautiful 1939 Bosendorfer grand piano was a bit neglected. I inherited the piano, had it restored and still play it regularly. The piano has moved with the family everywhere we went over the years.'

'I have also conducted church choirs in Melbourne and in the USA, and sung bass in concert choirs in Melbourne and Sydney, performing the large works of Bach and Handel as well as modern works. My musical training has also been put to use in the preparation of three ecumenical hymn books, in 1977, 1987 and 1999. The first sold well over 1 million copies. The 1999 book serves five of the major churches in Australia: Anglican, Churches of Christ, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Uniting.'

The work on hymn books combined three of Dr Wood's main interests: theology, liturgy and music. He is currently writing a commentary on the 1999 hymnal *Together in Song*, which is promising to be a very large volume. 'This is my biggest project since retiring three years ago', he says.

'The Ethics Committee work, on the other hand, helps to keep my interests broad, and keeps me in touch with areas of work different from my immediate projects. I am glad that when I handed in my letter of resignation on leaving Canberra in 1996, Director Richard Madden and the then Committee Chair Sid Sax thought it would be good to have non-Canberrans on the Committee, and persuaded me to stay. I am still enjoying it!'

Dr Wood and his wife Janet live in Gisborne, north of Melbourne. Janet is a Member of the Commonwealth Refugee Review Tribunal. They have two children and three grandchildren.



Statistical Information Management Committee

You might notice that the heading for this segment has changed. The previous National Health Information Management Group (NHIMG) is no more. It is now, as part of a broad restructure of national health information governance agreed by Health Ministers, the Statistical Information Management Committee. The story is as follows:

On 31 July 2003 the Australian Health Ministers' Council endorsed new arrangements for national development of health information management and information technology. The new arrangements have been designed to enable more coordinated, coherent governance of national data collection, data standards and information technology.

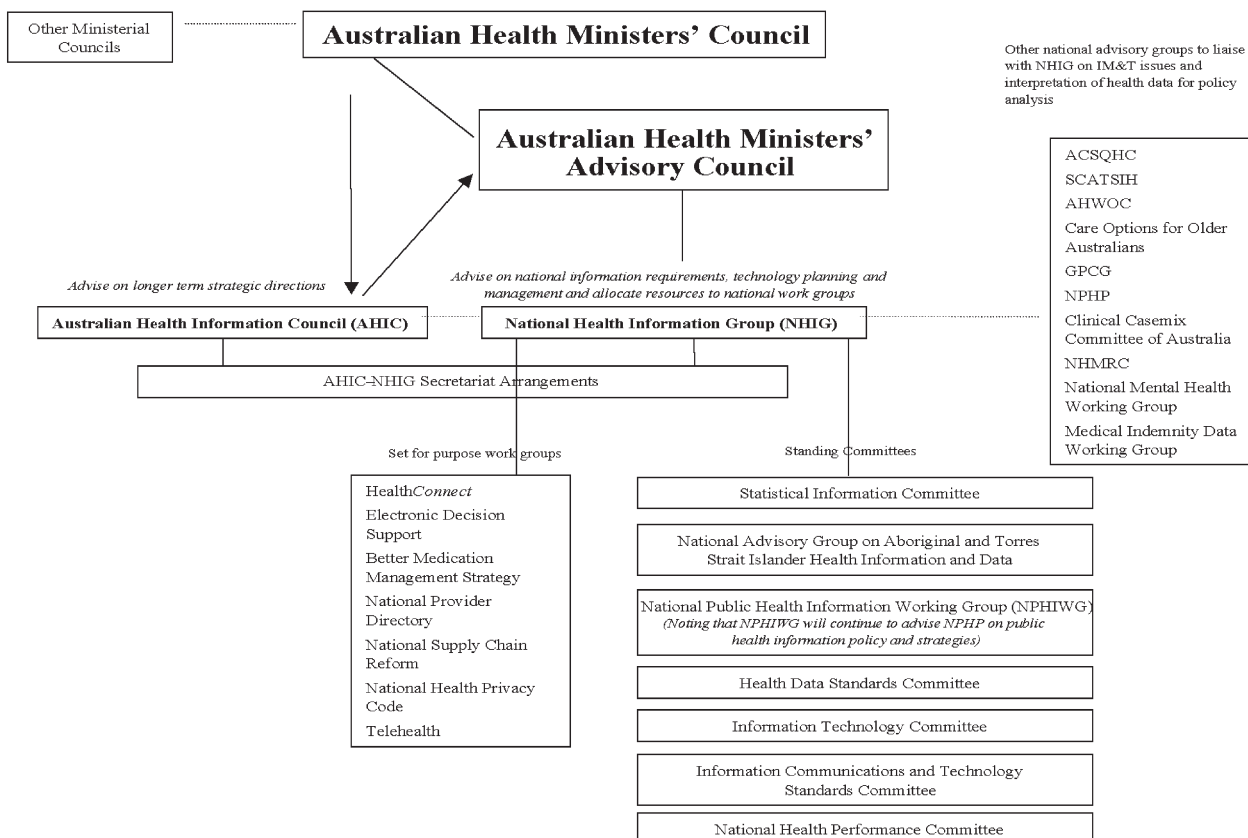
The National Health Information Group (NHIG) was established to advise the Australian Health Ministers'

Advisory Council on planning and management requirements and to allocate resources to health information projects and working groups.

In order to streamline and better coordinate ongoing information management and technology planning and development, a new committee and working group structure sitting underneath NHIG were created. Ministers agreed to the establishment of:

- a Statistical Information Committee;
- a Health Data Standards Committee;
- an Information Technology Committee; and
- an Information Communications and Technology Standards Committee.

New National Structure



In addition, Ministers agreed that the existing **National Advisory Group on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Information and Data**, **National Public Health Information Working Group** and the **National Health Performance Committee** would become standing committees of NHIG. The chart shows the new national structure.

Dr Ric Marshall, who previously represented the Victorian Department of Human Services on the NHIMG, has been appointed Chair of the Statistical Information Management Committee. Membership of the group has been extended to include a representative of the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

The first meeting of the newly-established group was held on 14 November. As well as continuing with its existing role to endorse for collection a range of national minimum data sets cleared by the Health Data Standards Committee, members reviewed the terms of reference for the group, and put in place processes for the renewal of the National Health Information Agreement.

For further information, please contact Margaret Fisher, Secretary, Statistical Information Management Committee, email margaret.fisher@aihw.gov.au

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Services Information Management Group (NCSIMG)

The key news from this group is the agreement in principle by the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council (CSMAC), at their meeting in October, of the proposal by Dr David Filby, Chair of NCSIMG, that a new National Community Services Information Agreement covering the period from 2004 to 2009 should be developed.

David consulted widely with both government and NGO representatives of the community services sector when he prepared his report to CSMAC. He will hold further consultations, including discussions at NCSIMG meetings, as part of his work on the new Agreement.

CSMAC also agreed that the new Agreement should provide for the continuing involvement of the non-government sector through its membership of the National Community Services Data Committee and that New Zealand be invited to join NCSIMG.

Version 3 of the National Community Services Data Dictionary is soon to be released on the AIHW web site and will be published in January 2004. Version 3 introduces common metadata items for both the National Community Services and the National Health Data Dictionaries.

For further information, please contact Margaret Fisher, Secretary, National Community Services Information Management Group, email margaret.fisher@aihw.gov.au

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