
What do we mean by policy?

‘Policy’ is a term with a range of meanings, which can make it difficult for people to share the same understanding about its development and purpose.

Policy can mean the ideas and plans held by government for doing something. It is sometimes used as an umbrella term to include a government’s, a government department’s or another organisation’s mission, philosophy, goals.¹ It can mean rules decided by a board of management about how things in an organisation should be done, and in this context it is often accompanied by, and sometimes contrasted with, the term ‘procedures’ (that is, how the policy is implemented).

It is difficult to be clear about where policy ends and procedures begin, as it partly depends on perspective (e.g. ‘the organisation is a smoke free workplace’ might be a policy; or might be a procedure of a broader policy of ‘all staff have a right to a safe and healthy working environment’). Similarly, it can be difficult to distinguish between issues relating to policy, as an overarching plan or framework, and those relating to implementation, where the policy is translated into action. Again, perspective helps to determine the dividing line.

Bullen makes a useful list of the various elements of policy, which may all be part of the answer to ‘what is policy?’ but often one in particular will be emphasised, depending on the context of the discussion.

- Policy creates a framework for action
- Policy is a decision
- Policy is grounded in legitimate authority
- Policy is a written product
- Policy is in the hearts and minds of people (it needs to be known to be acted on)
- Policy creation is an ongoing process
- Policy is a wider framework within which an organisation operates (awards, legislation etc.)

Some reasons for having policy include:

- So people working in an organisation can have a framework for actions that helps them get on with the job they need to do
- So people in the organisation don’t have to keep on discussing and rediscussing the same issues every time they arise – one thought-out decision can be applied to many similar cases – efficiency.

These two points apply equally to internal policy and procedures, as well as organisationally endorsed views about values, positions to advocate from.

At GPDV the term is usually used in one of the following senses:

1. **Policy and procedures.** These govern the internal operation of GPDV, are endorsed at either CEO or board level, assist staff in carrying out aspects of their jobs, and form part of the written documentation that supports our accreditation as a ‘quality organisation’. Policies and procedures in this sense are not really relevant to this paper.

¹ Some of the ideas in this and following two paragraphs draw on Paul Bullen, *Writing policy and organisation manuals* www.mapl.com.au/policy/tp1.htm, accessed 24 June 2003.

2. More often, we use the term ‘policy’ to characterise discussion and debates about the government’s (ie state or commonwealth) policies, or views, or plans, about the health system.

2a Government policy. These may be stated formally, or are sometimes implicit in decisions that do not form a coherent, systematic policy, but nevertheless provide some sort of framework for the government’s views or plan of action.

2b GPDV’s views on issues relevant to the health system as a whole, the place of general practice within it, and the role of divisions of general practice with respect to general practice.

Although GPDV does not make ‘policy’ in the sense that a government (with legitimate authority) does, we sometimes use the term ‘policy position’ or ‘position statement’ to convey the idea that we are talking about a broad view, that is endorsed by GPDV’s board of management, about something to do with the health system that is usually external to GPDV’s own operations.

The purpose of establishing such a policy is to guide GPDV’s advocacy in relation to a particular health area. (Examples might be ways to ensure participation by the wider community in the operation of divisions and of general practice services; issues occurring in the relationship between general practice and hospitals and what should be done to improve it and thereby create better care for the public; the most appropriate role(s) for general practice to play when trying to enhance population health outcomes, etc.)

GPDV’s definition of policy position:

A statement adopted and/or ratified by the Board of Directors that establishes the official position of the organisation on a matter about the operation of the Australian health system and serves as the basis for GPDV action.

How are issues raised that may lead to GPDV developing a policy position?

- Direction identified by GPDV’s board of management
- Response to government policy, or more frequently, a specific initiative
- Issue raised by a division – through input at regular meetings between divisions and GPDV (at staff level, e.g. through CEO or program-based network meetings; at board level, via Future Directions Forum or quarterly forums; through formal request to GPDV board)

How is it developed?

- A discussion paper is prepared (circulated as “Policy Issues Paper”) which usually sets out conclusion and/or set of recommendations, on which comment is sought from divisions (and other interested stakeholders, if appropriate). Sometimes key questions are included.
- Collated feedback is presented to GPDV board
- GPDV board confirms its position or view on the issue

How is it documented?

- Depending on the issue, the timeline, and what is required, a position statement is published or a submission is made.
- When following on from discussion in a policy issues paper, it is found in the same location on the GPDV website.
- Where GPDV makes a written submission to a consultation, it is circulated to divisions and published on the website.
- Views of the board on particular issues that inform representation and advocacy, which cannot go through this development process (because of shortage of resources and/or timelines for response by others), are collated and documented in GPDV’s register of policy positions on the website.