

Submission to National Human Rights Consultation

Young peoples rights to specialised and targeted health services

June 2009

About NAAH

The NSW Association for Adolescent Health¹ (NAAH) is the peak body committed to working on behalf of the youth health sector in NSW to promote and advocate for the health needs and well being of marginalised young people aged 12 to 25 years.

NAAH works closely with the State's seventeen youth health services and the majority of NAAH's work focuses on providing the youth health sector with support and training, government liaison and lobbying, policy and resource development, and community sector networking.

Young people's health and well being

Research suggests that the health and well being of young people is fairing well², especially in comparison to other age and sub-groups of the population. Research also suggests however, that adolescence, or the transition from childhood to adulthood, is a crucial time in the development of health-related attitudes and behaviours. NAAH recognises that adolescence can be a period of high risk taking and habit forming behaviour, both of which can have long-term ramifications on their health and wellbeing. Research shows that health compromising attitudes and behaviours exhibited in adulthood are often initiated during adolescence, making this an ideal time for prevention and early intervention initiatives.

Major health concerns for young people aged 12 to 25 years recognised by NAAH include: sexual health; mental health; self-harm and injury; alcohol and other drugs; and sexuality.

NAAH also acknowledges that health is much more than simply the absence of illness and disease, and acknowledges the impact that social and environmental factors, such as: poverty; gender; housing and homelessness; cultural and ethnic background; family functioning; and geographical location and connectedness with school or community, significantly impact on the health and well being of young people.

Young people's human rights

As stated in the *Let's Talk About Rights*, National Human Rights Consultation Toolkit³, the human rights and freedoms particularly relevant to children and young people in Australia include the right to:

¹ The NSW Association for Adolescent Health (NAAH) is the peak body for the health service providers committed to promoting the health and well being of young people aged 12 to 25 years in NSW. NAAH represents over 100 members who advocate for quality health care for marginalised young people whose health status and help seeking behaviours may be compromised by, for example, homelessness, poverty, mental illness, substance use, unemployment and/or disengagement from education.

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007) *Young Australians: their health and wellbeing 2007*. Cat. no. PHE 87. Canberra: AIHW.

³ Australian Human Rights Commission (2009) *Let's Talk About Rights: National Human Rights Consultation Toolkit*, Australian Human Rights Commission.

- an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing and housing;
- the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health;
- be safe and free from violence;
- life;
- education;
- express their own views and have them taken into account;
- be detained *only* as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time and, if detained, to be treated humanely, with dignity and in a way that takes into account their age;
- fair working conditions; and
- privacy.

The NSW Association for Adolescent Health recognises that a young person has the right to: have control over their own health and well being; have access to health and other services; and participate in health care decisions.

This paper advocates for young people's (especially those under-represented and disempowered as a result of their membership of marginalised populations) right to specialised and targeted health services which are based on best practice evidence, in order to achieve the 'highest attainable standard of physical and mental health'.

Young people's right to specialised and targeted health services

All young people have the right to access free specialised and targeted health services, including those young people who are disempowered as a result of their membership of marginalised populations such as:

Young people who are

- socio-economically disadvantaged;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander;
- culturally and linguistically diverse;
- refugees;
- homeless or at risk of homelessness;
- gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender;
- living with a disability;
- socially isolated;
- living in regional and rural areas;
- experiencing mental health problems;
- experiencing alcohol or emerging drug and alcohol problems;
- experiencing a dual diagnosis;
- at-risk of, currently in or leaving out of home care;
- in contact with the criminal justice system;
- victims of crime;
- living with a history of abuse, neglect and trauma; and
- experiencing family breakdown.⁴

For the purpose of this paper, the term *marginalised young people* will refer to, and include, all of the above groups.

Description of current specialised and targeted health services for young people in NSW

In NSW, specialised and targeted health services for young people are known as 'youth health services'. These services target marginalised young people aged 12 to 25 years who, due to their personal circumstances, have limited access to mainstream, child and adult health services. Research indicates that marginalised young people are reluctant to seek treatment from

⁴ Silk, J. (1999) *Getting it Right Report*, NSW Association for Adolescent Health.

mainstream, child and/or adult services as they view them as judgemental and unsympathetic to their needs and life situations⁵. Mainstream services often do not provide settings and interventions that are friendly to young people and subsequently lack the flexibility to engage this diverse group in healthcare.

Youth health services aim to address and improve the health and well being needs of young people by providing developmentally appropriate programs as well as multiple and easy 'soft' points of access to health and relates services, acknowledging the varying needs, referral pathways and engagement preferences of young people. Examples of programs and services provided by youth health services in NSW include counselling, health promotion, primary health care clinics, alcohol and other drug services, case management, outreach, arts based and drop in health services.

Youth health services approach young people's health in a holistic manner and place a strong focus on early intervention and prevention. Early intervention and prevention programs are vital components of youth health services as they increase access to at risk or homeless young people who are often 'hard-to-reach' because of the complexity of their needs and/or failures in the service system. Youth health services are staffed by multidisciplinary teams and undertake intersectorial collaboration based on the understanding that health is more than merely the absence of disease.

In order to promote and encourage access by marginalised young people, youth health services are located in areas of extreme disadvantage and locations that are easily accessible by public transport. Services must not only be accessible geographically, physically, and culturally, but also in all its procedures including financial and administrative arrangements. Through the provision of free services, youth health services are able to help young people overcome poverty and financial barriers, such as bulkbilling, which would otherwise limit young people's access to mainstream healthcare.

Accessibility to youth health services is paramount to improving the health and well being needs of marginalised and 'hard to reach' young people⁶. Best practice evidence describes an accessible youth health service as one that is:

- available at times suitable to young people;
- easy to get to (geographically accessible premises and/or outreach service);
- culturally appropriate on a variety of levels relating to ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability and "youth culture";
- "youth-friendly" and respectful in its engagement strategies;
- a deliverer of services and programs that are relevant to young people and delivered in a youth-friendly way;
- confidential and respectful of privacy;
- free;
- consultative with young people and their communities;
- an advocate for young people in the wider society;
- a promoter of access for young people in other services; and
- enabling of youth participation.

Summary

In summary, young people, particularly marginalised young people, have the right to free and easily accessible, specialised and targeted health services if they are to achieve the highest attainable standard of physical, social and mental health. As a society, we must protect young people's right to achieving the highest attainable standard of physical, social and mental health, and ensure that young people, and their health, are not subject to human rights violations.

⁵ Miller, M. and Lazarevic, L. (2007) *Review of Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth Program Final Report – December 2007*. Department of Health and Aging, December 2007.

⁶ Kang, M., Bernard, D., Usherwood, T., Quine, S., Aperstein, G., Kerr-Roubicek, H., Elliott, A. & Bennett, D. (2005) *Better Practice in Youth Health: Final Report on Research Study Access to Health Care Among Young People in New South Wales: Phase 2*. NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health.