



New South Wales Association for Adolescent Health Position Paper

Young People and Approaches to their Health and Well-being

Background

The New South Wales Association for Adolescent Health Incorporated is the peak body committed to working with and advocating for the youth health sector in NSW (Australia) to promote the health and well being of young people aged 12-25 years. The following principles inform the processes by which the NSW Association for Adolescent Health Inc. conducts business and meets its objectives:

1. Health is more than the absence of disease, but rather, a state of complete physical, mental and social well being¹. This notion accepts the social determinants of health which requires intersectoral collaboration and population-based approaches in addition to traditional models of health service delivery to young people.
2. Promoting equal opportunities and access to services can improve the health and well being of all young people, particularly at-risk or under-represented young people.
3. Health service delivery which promotes social justice and fairness can enable young people to reach their full potential and have their human rights respected.
4. Collaboration and consultation with the youth health sector and intersectoral partners facilitate the Association's ability to meet its vision, mission statement and objectives.
5. Building the capacity of the youth health sector strengthens and maintains the provision of relevant and evidence-based services to young people aged 12-25 years.
6. Regular critical review and planning ensures accountability and promotes the strategic governance and operation of the Association.

The Association works closely with the NSW's Youth Health Services and the NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health. The Association's work focuses on youth health sector support and training, government liaison, community sector networking and lobbying, policy and resource development.

The Association recognises that young people are not a homogeneous group and therefore they need a diverse range of services, programmes and activities. The Association affirms NSW Health's statement that *"as a young person progresses through adolescence emotional health, relationships with family and friends become more dominant issues. Concerns about sexuality, sexual orientation, body image, mental health, risk taking and experimentation may occur at this time. In view of these differences, services need to be sensitive and responsive to both the physical and emotional developmental needs of young people"* (Young People's Health: Our Future, NSW Health, 1999).

With this in mind the Association has developed the following paper to articulate the foundation principles that underpin working with young people in a holistic way.

¹ Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organisation as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 1946. Online source: <http://www.who.int/about/definition/en/> Access date: 23rd December 2005



Also provided are some suggested strategies to implement the foundation principles in an effective way.

In the development of services, reference should be made to the New South Wales Health Department's commitment to *'improve access to health services by young people'* and to *'improve the quality of services provided to young people'*. Additionally, there needs to be the understanding that *'young people have specific health problems, needs and concerns. These problems, needs and concerns differ from the needs of adults or children'* as stated in the Department's policy document "Young People's Health: Our Future", January 1999, needs to be incorporated in service provision.

Young People's Health and Wellbeing

While it could be claimed that young people enjoy good health in comparison to other age groups, the Association believes 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.

'Adolescence is a period of life in which health behaviours are formed and many health problems begin' (Young People's Health: Our Future, NSW Health, 1999).

The Association identifies the following as the major health issues for young people in NSW:

- Sexual Health
- Mental Health
- Self-Harm and Injury
- Alcohol and Other Drugs
- Sexuality

The Association recognises the great impact the following social factors have on the health and well being of young people:

- Poverty
- Gender
- Housing
- Cultural and ethnic background
- Family functioning
- Geographical location
- Connectedness with school or community

The Association also recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Straight Island young people experience far greater health concerns than the average population and given this have a number of specific needs.

Developmental Stages

Adolescence is a time of transition between childhood and adulthood. It may be defined as a period within the lifespan when most of the individual's biological, cognitive, psychological and social characteristics are changing.

It is a myth that there is one adolescent stage between the ages of 12 and 25. The reality is that within this age bracket young people experience three developmental stages, identified as early, middle and late, in which the adolescent negotiates different tasks and challenges.



The Association believes that adoption of a developmental approach allows services to appropriately respond to adolescent health needs according to the young person's developmental stage.

Cultural Identity

The association recognises that culture cannot only be defined as ethnicity or race, but encompasses an individual's values, meanings and outlook on the world, and its' social, economic and political structure. Adolescent health should be considered in a context of gender, sexuality, culture, class and due consideration should also be given to subcultures that exist.

Social View of Health

With these factors in mind the Association sees it as imperative to incorporate a social view of health into service planning and delivery when working with young people. A social view of health means that we must intervene to change those aspects of the environment which are promoting the ill-health, rather than continue to simply deal with the illness after it appears, or continue to exhort individuals to change their attitudes and lifestyles when in fact the environment in which they live and work gives them little choice or support for making such changes (South Australian Health Commission, 1988).

Social Justice

The Association also promotes the implementation of social justice principles into the development of programmes and activities for young people.

Young people are a disadvantaged group in society and therefore programmes and services need to embrace social justice principles in order to work effectively with them. Principles contained within a social justice framework can be drawn from the United Nation Convention of the Rights of the Child.

Risk and Resilience

In adopting a developmental approach, the association maintains a commitment to the promotion of resiliency in young people. Resiliency can be defined as the ability to overcome adverse life events and experiences. Three major sources of resilience are an external facilitative environment, intrapsychic strengths and internal coping skills. The Association endorses and promotes youth services, programmes and activities that develop resiliency in young people through the provision of a supportive environment, the promotion of supportive structures and environments which promote connectedness within families and the local community, and that enhance intrapsychic strengths and adaptive coping skills.

Participation

Children and young people continue to be one of the few identifiable health consumer groups that have little or no input into the provision of their health care services within the mainstream model. The Association strongly endorses the active participation of young people in the articulation of their healthcare needs.

Young people should be encouraged and enabled to participate in the planning, policy development, service delivery and on-going evaluation of services, programmes and activities through:



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- Identifying consumer expectations of the service
- Providing young people accessing the service with a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities
- Providing young people with a clear understanding of confidentiality policy and practice
- Involving young people in decisions relating to the priorities of the services through consultation and strategic planning processes
- Including young people in the ongoing development and evaluation of consumer feedback mechanisms
- Involving young people in the development of health education resources
- Providing young people with opportunities to participate in decisions relating to their own health care management
- Through consultation allowing young people to be involved in decisions regarding policy and service development issues.

Health Promotion

The WHO Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion states that health promotion action must occur on five fronts. They include: building health public policy, creating environments which support health living, strengthening community action, developing personal skills and reorientation the health care system. The Jakarta Declaration on Leading Health Promotion into the 21st century builds on the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion and identifies the following pre-requisites for health as:

- Peace
- Shelter
- Education
- Social security
- Food
- Income
- Empowerment of women
- A stable ecosystem
- Sustainable resource use
- Social justice
- Social relations
- Respect for human rights and equity

The Association endorses the above definition and encourages a broad based approach to the provision of health promotion programmes and activities.

Strategies to address Young people's Health and Well-being

In the provision of health services to young people, the Association acknowledges the diverse health needs of the target group. The association sees the need for organisations, agencies and individuals to develop services that are culturally appropriate to the needs of



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young people. Therefore the Association recommends that the following strategies be used to address the health and well-being issues of young people.

- Services should have a multi-dimensional approach and include counselling, medical services, group work, outreach services, health promotion and the provision of health information and resources.
- Health Promotion strategies should be diverse and include community development, health education, assist in building public policy and develop personal skills.
- Services working with young people should work towards better practice models, specifically in regards to confidentiality policy and practice, duty of care and the development of codes of behaviour for staff and clients within their services.
- Services working with young people should strategically develop partnerships and working relationships with organisations, agencies and individuals in their local communities. These partnerships should enable a more effective response to the local client groups.
- In the development of services and programmes addressing the health needs of young people, services should ensure that participation principles (as articulated in this document) be a key feature of program development, implementation and evaluation.

The New South Wales Association for Adolescent Health encourages the continued funding of youth health services under the Innovative Health Services For Homeless Young People Program (IHSYHP).

The Association also supports youth services in the provision of health services in NSW and promotes the development of partnerships and initiatives that address the health needs of young people.

Further documentation addressing approaches to Young People's Health Care:

- *The National Health Plan For Young Australians*, Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services, 1996
- *Young People's Health: Our Future*, New South Wales Department of Health, 1999
- *Getting It Right*, New South Wales Association For Adolescent Health, Joan Silk, 1999
- Quality Improvement Council *Primary and Community Health Care Manual of Standards*, 2000
- *Valuing Young Lives, Evaluation of the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Penny Mitchell, 2000.
- *Innovative Health Services For Homeless Young People, Evaluation Report, Guidelines For Best Practice*, Rigmor Berg and Juliet London, 1984.

Ratification



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This position statement was developed by the New South Wales Association for Adolescent Health Executive Committee and staff.

It was unanimously passed and approved as an official Position Statement of the New South Wales Association for Adolescent Health on Monday August 20, 2001.