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MEN'S HEALTH—THE WAY FORWARD

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Gender-based inequities in the health of women have been acknowledged by policy makers and health service planners since the mid-1980s.¹ However, it has only been in recent years that inequalities in health outcomes for men have received attention, and gender-based issues in men's health have been examined for potential solutions.²

Until recently, there has been little inquiry into understanding what 'good practice' in men's health really means. Perhaps more concerning is the presumption that, as health services do not appear to fully recognise and respond to women's health needs, they must—by implication—be meeting the health needs of men. However, little research has been done to find out what men respond to in the way of the location of health services, attitude of service providers, methods of practice, ways of presenting information, and the physical environment of the health services to be provided.²

Despite these particular difficulties, the issue of men's health and wellbeing is gaining attention in the community. Perhaps most significantly, men themselves are becoming increasingly aware of their health needs, are showing a greater willingness to talk about those needs and are acting in positive ways to improve their health.

Most of the current activities that support men's health are based at the local level—among health professionals such as community nurses and health promotion officers—and are focused on issues involving primary health care. However, it should be noted that in almost all cases these local initiatives must struggle for access to much-needed resources.

In response to the need for statewide leadership in men's health, the NSW Department of Health developed and launched the policy framework *Moving Forward in Men's Health*.³ This article describes that policy, which summarises current information about men's health, and presents an analysis of the known determinants that influence the health of men across their life-cycle.

BACKGROUND

In Australia, the first step towards developing a men's health policy was taken by the Commonwealth

Department of Human Services and Health in 1996 when it launched its *Draft National Men's Health Policy*.⁴ Unfortunately, no final policy on men's health was completed. However, funding was provided by this Department for a number of initiatives including a biennial national men's health conference; the development of a men's health research agenda; and a national centre of excellence in male reproductive health.⁵

Work towards the development of a men's health policy in NSW commenced in 1997. Research conducted by the NSW Department of Health at the time revealed that no country in the world had produced a men's health policy. Since then, in addition to NSW, discussion papers have been developed by:

- the Health Department of Western Australia, *Men's Health Policy and Discussion Paper* (1997);⁶
- the Department of Human Services of South Australia, *The Health and Well Being of Men in South Australia: A Discussion Paper* (2000).⁷

Developments in men's health within Australia are mirrored in the United Kingdom; and more so in the United States, where work is under way—with the support of US Congress—to establish a national Office of Men's Health to work in partnership with the Office of Women's Health.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN HEALTH

Our gender influences our understanding and experience of health, how we use health services, and our ultimate health outcomes.¹ Gender also influences the decisions made by those responsible for providing services. Studies conducted in Australia and other western countries have identified that men:

- use health services at a lower rate (especially early intervention and prevention services);^{8–10}
- experience higher rates of cardiovascular disease and cancer;^{8–10}
- experience higher rates of accidents and injuries, including suicide.^{8–13}

A variety of risk behaviours—such as smoking and drinking, driving dangerously, and undertaking dangerous jobs—are significant contributors to poorer health status; but these should not be seen in isolation from the socioeconomic context in which men live and work.¹⁴

Factors such as occupation and level of income, unemployment, and personal relationships interact with ethnicity, sexual and cultural identity, and age to influence and determine health status and health behaviours.¹⁴⁻¹⁸

THE WAY FORWARD

Moving Forward in Men's Health has been developed by the NSW Department of Health to provide a policy framework for men's health in NSW. Specifically, *Moving Forward in Men's Health*:

affirms:

- the importance of men's health as an issue;
- a commitment to improving men's health;
- the need to target those men in the community who are most in need;

identifies and promotes:

- ways in which health agencies and other agencies can develop partnerships to improve the health of men;
- examples of men's health projects and programs;

provides direction and support:

- to area health services and to projects in the local community;
- to health professionals who see a need to 'do something' in men's health but do not know how or where to begin;
- for further research into reasons why men and women have differing health outcomes, and what interventions may be required to prevent disease and injury and to promote good health in men;

recommends how:

- the health of men can be improved;
- health services may be better structured and coordinated to meet the needs of different groups men.

Moving Forward in Men's Health also presents a number of strategies that are aimed at promoting and protecting men's health in NSW. These are grouped into the following key focus areas:

Making health services more accessible and appropriate for men

As members of the NSW community, all men are able to access a range of public and private health services including general practitioners, community-based health services, and hospitals. However, there is strong evidence that women utilise existing health services more often and more effectively than men.⁸ According to unpublished Medicare data provided to the NSW Department of Health by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services in 1998, access to medical practitioners is almost identical between boys and girls up to age 14.¹⁹ From the ages of 14 to 44 women access medical practitioners at a much higher rate, largely explained as being due to issues

concerning contraception and childbirth.¹⁹ However, beyond age 44 the differences persist.¹⁹

Men tend to delay seeking health assistance longer than women. This may partially explain high death rates for men, particularly in the 35-44 age group; men may have ignored (or not recognised) symptoms and delayed seeking help for years, and by the time they do seek help, their condition may have progressed.

Developing supportive and healthy environments

Many of the environments where men live and work do not support healthy lifestyles or healthy behaviours. Developing supportive and healthy environments is about creating a positive environment in which men's health issues can be raised both by health workers and by men themselves. A supportive environment also promotes stronger networks for social support for men and establishes better pathways for seeking help.

Improving coordination and collaboration of services

To make any improvement in men's health status, health professionals and services need to work together and look outside the health system to foster collaborative partnerships with both government and non-government agencies. The potential for collaborative partnerships, which can have a positive effect on the health of men and the wider community, are numerous: workplace safety programs, driver and road safety campaigns, innovative approaches to sporting and recreational activities to reduce injuries, partnerships with a range of media to raise awareness on specific issues for men.

Research and information

The statistics describing the patterns of men's mortality are well documented. Contributing factors include risk-taking behaviour, smoking, lack of physical activity, diet and mental illness. Recent evidence suggests that a man who experiences feeling a lack of control over his life also experiences negative effects on his health.^{20,21} The major challenge for research is to look at why these risk factors are so common among men, and what health promotion and other interventions are effective in addressing them. Research on social and behavioural issues, as well as clinical issues, is needed.²²⁻²⁴

Workforce development and training

A fundamental aspect of providing quality health care is ensuring that the health workforce is informed and appropriately trained. An important and cost-effective step to improve men's health, which uses existing health resources, is training existing health care professionals, as well as students of tertiary medical and health science courses, to work better with men and consider the specific health needs of men. This training should be available to all health care professionals, including clinicians, community health workers, health promotion workers, and primary health care workers.

Of equal importance is encouraging a greater participation of males in the health promotion and community health workforces.

Moving Forward in Men's Health recognises the importance of capacity building to respond to issues of men's health and wellbeing issues. Examples of this in the policy include:

- supporting the development of a *NSW Men's Health Information and Resource Centre*;
- establishing an annual 'men's health week';
- establishing a small but important *Men's Health Innovation Fund*;
- identifying a men's health contact in each area health service.

Ultimately, the policy seeks to ensure that it is compatible with other health policy developments in areas such as alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs, youth health, women's health, gender policy and *Healthy People 2005*.

CONCLUSION

Moving Forward in Men's Health recognises that most of the improvements to be made in men's health rely on all sectors of the community, and all health and other agencies, working together in partnership. If that partnership is to be successful, men must be involved throughout the entire process of development and delivery of men's health services.

Copies of *Moving Forward in Men's Health* can be downloaded from the NSW Department of Health's Web site at www.health.nsw.gov.au.

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