



Victorian Health Priorities Framework 2012-2022: Metropolitan Health Plan

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Introduction

Women's Health West (WHW) is the regional women's health service for the western metropolitan region of Melbourne in Victoria. Our services include research, health promotion, community development, training and advocacy around women's health, safety and wellbeing. Since 1994, WHW has also hosted the region's largest family violence crisis support and prevention program. These two main arms of the service place WHW in a unique position to incorporate women's experiences directly into our research, health promotion and project work, ensuring that we clarify the connections between structural oppression and individual experience.

As a feminist organisation we focus on redressing the gender and structural inequalities that limit the lives of women. WHW's work is underpinned by a social model of health and, as such, we recognise the important influence of, and aim to improve, the social, economic and political factors that determine the health, safety and wellbeing of women and their children in the western region. By incorporating a gendered approach to health promotion work that focuses on women, interventions to reduce inequality and improve health outcomes will be more effective and equitable.

Informed by our vision of equity and justice for women in the west, WHW's work is guided by the following five strategic goals:

- Delivering and advocating for accessible and culturally appropriate services and resources for women across the region
- Improving conditions in which women live, work and play in the western region of Melbourne
- Putting women's health, safety and wellbeing on the political agenda to improve the status of women
- Recognising that good health, safety and wellbeing begins in our workplace
- Working with others to achieve our goals.

WHW sits on the Board of the HealthWest Partnership and the Interim Governance Group of the Inner North West Primary Care Partnership. Our organisation is a member of the Women's Health Association of Victoria and the Australian Women's Health Network. WHW is well positioned to provide expertise and advice on the intersection between women's social experience and their health and wellbeing.

Response to the Victorian Health Priorities Framework 2012-2022: Metropolitan Health Plan

WHW welcomes the opportunity provided by the Victorian Government to provide feedback on the *Victorian Health Priorities Framework 2012-2022: Metropolitan Health Plan* (the *Metropolitan Health Plan*). We would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Victorian Government on the development of a long-term plan that outlines a commitment to working to ensure that all health services across the continuum of care are responsive to the needs of the community. WHW considers the statewide approach to health outlined in the plan as a positive step towards ensuring the optimal health and wellbeing of all Victorians.

A greater focus on primary prevention, population health and health promotion

A greater focus on primary prevention, population health and health promotion are integral to the vision of a healthy and fair Victoria. While the *Metropolitan Health Plan* identifies public health as a priority, WHW strongly advocates for the inclusion of a population health approach. Population health focuses on improving health and wellbeing through priority health approaches that tackle the disparities in health status between social groups in order to achieve health equity. Population health focuses on a broad range of factors that influence health and wellbeing at a population level – these are known as the social determinants of health. One of the most important and complex roles of our health care sector is to ensure health equity is achieved by focusing on the social determinants of health – such as gender, culture and socio-economic advantage – and the impact this has on the health of individuals and the population as a whole.

Population health interventions are essential in the health field, as working to redress the social determinants of health will prevent ill health and disease in a way that is both sustainable and cost-effective. Such an approach is complex yet pivotal, as integrated strategies that work to redress the social, economic and political determinants that drive ill health and disease are the most effective method of achieving improved health outcomes, particularly among disadvantaged communities. While WHW acknowledges that the social determinants of health are briefly discussed within the *Metropolitan Health Plan Technical Paper* (the *Technical Paper*), they seemingly remain unconsidered within the *Metropolitan Health Plan*. WHW recommends a stronger focus throughout the *Plan* on the social structures and conditions that impact upon the health, safety and wellbeing of Victorians.

It is essential that Victoria works towards developing a health system that is designed to meet the health needs of individuals, their families and communities, with a focus on prevention of disease and the maintenance of health, not simply the treatment of illness. Support for an integrated approach to the promotion of health is required to achieve this, with hospitals, primary and community care agencies working together. Not all Victorians receive equitable levels of primary health care services as a result of their geographical location, financial capacity or the condition of their health. On the other hand, 'research shows that those systems with strong primary health care are more efficient, have lower rates of hospitalisation, fewer health inequalities and better health outcomes' (DoHA, 2009: 8). In tandem with primary health care services, a health equity approach is central to the achievement of optimal health and wellbeing for all Victorians.

The principles of health promotion, prevention and the social model of health are key to the development of an efficient health care system with lower rates of hospitalisation, fewer health inequalities and better health outcomes. These principles risk being lost in the *Metropolitan Health Plan*, which give primacy to general practitioners and clinical skills as the mainstays of primary health care. WHW advocates for a strong focus on integrated health promotion throughout the plan. Integrated health promotion is where agencies in a catchment work collaboratively on priority health topics, using a mix of health promotion actions and capacity building strategies to achieve health and wellbeing outcomes. Integrated health promotion utilises collaborative partnerships, a balance of individual and population-based health promotion interventions supported by capacity building strategies and the clear identification of key partners across a broad range of sectors in order to bring about change. This includes organisations outside the traditional primary health care sector. This approach is informed by the recognition that the social determinants that drive ill health sit outside the health sector and, therefore, approaches must be coordinated across various sectors to achieve sustainable change.

Recommendation: A social model of health must be a central feature of the *Metropolitan Health Plan*.

Recommendation: Ensure that the *Metropolitan Health Plan* has a stronger focus on primary prevention and population health interventions that work to redress the social determinants of health.

Recommendation: The skills and knowledge of health promotion practitioners are acknowledged and used effectively in the development and implementation of the *Metropolitan Health Plan*.

Women's health services

In Victoria the women's and health promotion sectors are well established as leaders and innovators in primary prevention and population health initiatives that embed the social model of health across our catchments. WHW is one of the twelve women's health services across Victoria that includes both statewide and regional services. The benefits of region-wide and state-wide health promotion services cannot be stressed strongly enough. WHW has led and participated in a number of collaborative initiatives in the western metropolitan region that have resulted in innovative strategies for planning, delivering and evaluating services across the health care spectrum from primary prevention to tertiary intervention.

Women's health services in Victoria have led the way for regional health promotion initiatives that build organisational capacity, regional partnerships and a strategic integrated approach to optimise the health and wellbeing of Victorian women. For some years WHW has been leading catchment-wide initiatives in the areas of prevention of violence against women and sexual and reproductive health, in partnership with community health services, local government and various other organisations. Tailored to the particular characteristics of the western region, these initiatives aim to provide a coordinated and multidisciplinary approach to strategic prevention activities that work to redress the social determinants that drive women's ill health.

Currently it is unclear how these unique services will be integrated in the *Metropolitan Health Plan*. While community health services are mentioned throughout the plan and feature in the graphic representation of *Victoria's health system* (p. 11), women's health services are absent. WHW strongly recommends that the plan be amended to acknowledge women's health services and the integral role they play in health promotion and primary prevention. Indeed, women's health services across the state carry out research, advocacy, organisational capacity building, direct service delivery and health promotion that optimise the health, safety and wellbeing of Victorian women and girls.

Recommendation: Within the plan, specifically acknowledge women's health services and the integral role they play in health promotion and primary prevention.

Women's health, safety and wellbeing

WHW would like to commend the Victorian Government for its inclusion of women's health as a metropolitan health planning priority. The plan outlines that in order to improve the health and wellbeing of metropolitan women, the 'development and dissemination of health information and research, and the provision of community and professional education is required' (p. 49). WHW welcomes such a strategy as increasing primary prevention and health promotion activities that are responsive and respectful of women's needs is vital to improve health outcomes. However, to ensure that programs and services meet the diverse needs of women across Victoria, health policy and practice must redress the key issues of violence against women, sexual and reproductive health and mental health and wellbeing.

Violence against women

For Victorian women aged 15-44, violence is the leading cause of illness, death and disability – greater than any other factor including tobacco, alcohol-related harm and physical inactivity (VicHealth, 2014). Despite evidence that violence is the leading health concern for Victorian women, the plan fails to outline a plan for the provision of services to the increasing number of women and their children affected by violence, as well as a strategic approach to the primary prevention of violence against women. WHW strongly advocates for the inclusion of both primary prevention initiatives and tertiary responses to violence against women within the plan.

Sexual and reproductive health

Research shows that sexual violence, homophobia, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, infertility, and cancers of the sexual and reproductive organs are major contributors to Victorian morbidity rates (O'Rourke, 2005). While Victoria's overall population is among one of the healthiest in the world, there are unacceptably high rates of sexual and reproductive ill health that continue to rise and disproportionately affect women and girls. WHW advocates for the inclusion within the plan of sustainable health promotion initiatives that work to prevent ill health and curb the increasing burden of disease associated with sexual and reproductive morbidity and its ongoing social and economic impact. Such strategies need to be complemented by increased service coordination of

primary healthcare and clinical sexual and reproductive health services, especially for women and girls.

Mental health and wellbeing

WHW welcomes the proactive approach taken by the Victorian Government to mental health, including a focus on youth suicide prevention, improved housing outcomes for people with a severe mental illness and an emphasise on translating research into evidence-based treatment and clinical practice. In an attempt to strengthen this approach to mental health, WHW recommends that the plan integrate a gender sensitive approach to mental health policy, and program and service provision to ensure the different needs of women and men are met. Evidence from the World Health Organisation indicates that men and women experience mental health and mental illness differently, with clear gendered differences in the onset, prevalence, diagnosis, treatment, and outcomes of mental health and depression. WHW also advocates for a clearer focus within the plan to improve access by women to mental health prevention activities and programs, particularly for women at high risk of mental health issues including Indigenous women, newly arrived and refugee women, young women, women with a disability and sole parents.

Indeed, in order to have a significant impact on health outcomes, the *Metropolitan Health Plan* must redress the key health concerns of violence against women, sexual and reproductive health and mental health and wellbeing. Integrating women's health policy and practice within other areas of government policy in a coordinated manner is also pivotal in achieving a healthy, equitable and sustainable Victoria.

Recommendation: Greater emphasis within the *Metropolitan Health Plan* on a social determinants approach to health policy with a focus on the priority areas of violence against women, sexual and reproductive health, and mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendation: Increased primary prevention and health promotion activities that are responsive to the needs of women and girls.

References

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