

Relationships Australia

Tasmania

National Men's Health Policy Submission from *TassieMale* Program on behalf of Relationships Australia, Tasmania

Introduction

Relationships Australia Tasmania (RA Tas) is grateful for this opportunity to take part in the Men's Health Policy Initiative. RA Tas is committed to working with individuals, families and communities to have a positive well being and relationships.

RA Tas through the *TassieMale* program is funded under the Men and Relationships funding of the federal government and provides a counselling, information, education and referral service designed specifically to be an enabling approach helpful to men and their communities in dealing with life issues such as health and mental wellbeing. The program also serves as a vehicle to raise awareness in the community regarding issues relevant to men. The service takes the position that good health and wellbeing is about a number of levels and that a broad definition of health is required.

Key Activities

- To value the skills, energy and contributions men make to their communities and families.
- To view all men as possessing a capacity and desire to contribute effectively.
- Working with men in a strengths focus, to overcome labels and barriers
- Individual work with men assisting them to build on their capacity as people, partners and parents
- Support, information and referral services to men through groups, workshops, education sessions and public forums
- Provision of information material and resources that help men develop sustainable family relationships
- Targeted health promotions, community development events, information and referral activities which focus on the issues and needs of diverse groups of men
- Promotion of collaborative frameworks with other Service Providers and existing services for men such as Mensline Australia.

Background

We consider Men's emotional, physical and mental Health to be an important if not the most important aspect of men's lives and we are committed to improving the social, emotional and physical health and wellbeing of all men. We believe that this should be progressed in a way that is not detrimental to women and children but rather in a holistic, collaborative and inclusive approach.

In concert with these aims, we recognise that for our work with the individual to be sustainable, we also need to work in a holistic and pro-active way at the systems or structures level in terms of raising community awareness regarding the health needs

of men in society today and applaud and endorse the Committee's 'grassroots' approach; hence our submission to this important process.

TassieMale has been operating since 2001 and has provided support to over one thousand men and their communities and families. This work and recent conversations on the issue of men's health, informs the position outlined below.

Submission

From our consultations with men the following recommendations emerged

1. The need for a uniform approach to men's health
2. The need for the social determinants of men's health to be taken into account when formulating policy
3. The need to consider the pivotal relationships in men's lives – including with partners and children and the impact of the loss or interruption to those relationships.
4. The need to take into account the various environments where men live and work
5. The need for strong education and awareness programs especially in regional and rural areas
6. The need for networks for men to be expanded for all men from different cultures and backgrounds as well as rural areas.

Discussion

We recognize that there is a need to be more responsive and proactive in regard to improving men's wellbeing. The progression of the issue of Men's health is relatively new and there have been a number of strategies developed over recent times to address the issues but the approach has been in isolation and in an "ad hoc" manner. The feedback from our consultations with men suggests that the following issues underlie the poor state of men's health in society today.

- Impact of Relationship breakdown and loss of contact and relationship with children
- Tobacco, Alcohol and other drugs¹
- Diet, nutrition, body weight
- Injury/ Suicide and Depression
- Men and Mental Health
- Men in Rural areas
- Men and Ethnicity
- Men and Disability
- Men and Sexuality issues including erectile dysfunction and negative attitude to alternative lifestyles.

To be able to fully address the above issues it would be necessary for community involvement at all stages of a national Men's Health Policy. In an effort to move

forward it is important that any Men's Health Policy take into account the different needs of local groups of men as well as men at a national level.

Recommendations

1. More support for Men's Sheds and collaboration between services.

What has been lacking in the past is a unified approach to men's health by health and service organizations. More emphasis needs to be placed on community based groups such as Men's Sheds which research suggests are vehicles better able to address men's health and well-being needs. In addition all men's health services need to work better together and create collaborative partnerships in order to educate and raise awareness of men's health issues, not only to men but also throughout the broader community.

2. Less emphasis on the medical model.

Another concern with Men's health is the obsession by some people with the medical model on men's health that seems to ignore the social determinants of health. Men's health issues may not be the fault of the individual but the fault of the social environment in which they live.

Social factors as highlighted below all have an effect on our health.

- Social exclusion
- Poverty
- Lack of acknowledgement of the role fathers play in their children's lives
- Job security and satisfaction
- Friendships
- Good social relations
- Cultural Differences
- Social Support networks
- Social and Physical environments
- Education status

All of the above are extremely important factors not only in the physical health of men but also to their emotional and mental health.

3. Promotion of supportive environments

A National Men's Health Policy needs to take into account the many environments where men live and work, especially those environments that do not support healthy lifestyles or healthy behaviors. Developing supportive and healthy environments would build a positive atmosphere wherein men's health issues can be raised and acted upon by health workers and men themselves. This approach would build social supports and create constructive networks for men.

4. Increased funding for fathering and parenting programs as well as workplace focused education programs for men working in isolated industries such as agriculture.

A National Men's Health Policy would need to support fathering and parenting programs such as ante-natal programs for fathers in collaboration with local hospital child birth educators and family planning organizations as well as increasing awareness of services available to men through public awareness campaigns & well co-coordinated men's health centres.

Men living and working in rural areas often work in hazardous workplaces including the use of dangerous chemicals and machinery as well as prolonged exposure to the sun; education and awareness programs in rural areas would also need to be included in a Men's Health Policy.

5. The establishment of stronger social support networks.

Prevailing cultural attitudes in which men are encouraged by our culture to be "tough and not complain because it is seen a sign of weakness" tends to encourage men to disregard their own health needs.

The above comment and others like it are all too common in our society and can only be addressed by stronger education and awareness programs. Social support networks for men are not extensive at this stage and need to be expanded and be more accessible to all men from different cultures and diverse backgrounds including those from rural and remote areas.

Conclusion

The recommendations point toward the need for the approach to be holistic and encompass the many varied situations where men live, work and play.

Policy will work best when men are involved in shaping it rather than as passive bystanders. This will we believe, lead to healthier outcomes for men with a flow on effect to their families, women and children, thereby improving the wellbeing of society as a whole.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these comments further if the opportunity arose.

Thank you
Tim Henry

On behalf of Tassiemale team and Relationships Australia

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