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**Senate Select Committee Inquiry into Men's  
Health**

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Wellbeing Association Inc.**

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## **Introduction**

**Tasmanian Men's Health and Wellbeing Association (TASMEN)** is a non-profit association whose aims include providing a contact, information and referral point for men, lobbying for the establishment of men's health services and supporting men's groups. The group has hosted annual men's gatherings for 12 years, held information stalls at events like the Hobart Show, offered a communication skills program for men and supported programs like the Anglicare 'Tools for Men' program. The Association has also delivered mentoring programs for boys in some southern Tasmanian schools, and a men's leadership training weekend. The Association has also contributed significantly to men's health consultations in Tasmania, and is currently working to develop other services, specifically for men. We are well placed to deliver support services to men in the future.

Men's health issues have to date not been seen as a high priority by any level of government in Australia. There is a corresponding paucity of research and evidence to support adequate understandings of men's health (Macdonald 2006). While men's health is gaining attention in the media and society, and the process of developing a National Men's Health Policy has started, there remains a lot of work to do to improve the health status of Australian men, and to bring the coordinated strategic approach needed to achieve this.

In 2006 Andrology Australia, the male reproductive health centre, was awarded \$4M over 4 years for its ongoing work, and at that time, they received the largest amount of Federal funding for men's health related activities (Malcher 2006), and this is a sad indictment on past governments and their commitment to the men in the community.

Tasmania has a strong focus on population health through the Department of Health and Human Services, and has begun to work specifically to address the needs of men through the establishment of full time Men's Health Policy and Program officer position from June 2008. The department however could invest further in men's specific activities, and bring fairness to the provision of some services through extending existing services to men in some way. For example the women's health information line, could be extended to providing information and referral services to men.

The social inclusion agenda has also been taken up strongly through the Department of Premier and Cabinet Social Inclusion Unit (SIU), and the department is working closely with the SIU across many issues. To date however men's specific issues have not been identified.

### ***The Tasmanian Context***

Most current funding is centred on clinical issues, in particular urological problems, such as prostate health and erectile dysfunction.

There is scope to extend the range of settings in which men are offered advice and information in regard to their health, as mentioned in the example above.

Great emphasis needs to be placed on educating health professionals in the manner in which they communicate with men. This will enhance men's access to prevention, early detection, best practice treatment and follow-up care and also access to clinical trials.

It is widely accepted that women more readily answer the call to action in regard to seeking help and information about health symptoms and problems. However more consideration needs to be given nationally as to why men do not have the same motivation as women and how we can improve communication with men in regard to health management, participation in prevention and early detection. In particular a focus is needed on the reasons that men with symptoms do not engage with medical assistance and are reticent to communicate any concerns to health care professionals and providers until further down the path of many illnesses.

Recent developments by Commonwealth and State governments to develop a more preventative approach to health are applauded, though they need to extend to understanding the social contexts of men's lives, including family and relationships, social economic status, work status and geo-location issues.

We note that while there are a number of programs in existence which partially address some of the health needs of men, there is scope to develop an overall framework and expand on existing programs to provide a more coordinated and integrated approach to men's health.

A concern about many programs that operate through NGO's are short term funded and do not support a model of continual improvement and consistent service delivery to consumers of health related services. For example the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) fund the Rural Alive and Well suicide intervention program running in the Southern Midlands and Central Highlands local government areas (LGAs), and this program is at this time funded only until June 2009. People who have been given support and confidence through this service may be left to fend for themselves once again with significant drought issues continuing. Workers have no knowledge of what the future holds and may need to find alternative work before the contract ends, leaving the final months of such program vulnerable to incomplete reporting and evaluation, services promised unable to be delivered, and communities feeling rejected and forgotten. For any population group, including men, this compounds the issues and disenfranchises them to new workers and new programs to be set up by the government or others.

Family Planning Tasmania offers information and clinic services to men through sexual health checks, advice and support on sexuality issues, contraception, though men do not tend to utilize the services, and great effort could be made to make the organisation appeal more to men.

A number of private counselors across the State work closely with men to address a range of personal issues.

In particular the OzHelp Foundation operates a workplace based early intervention suicide prevention and social capacity building program in the building and construction industry. This program has been highly successful and shows the

importance and value of health and wellbeing programs implemented through the workplace. Other industries are apparently requesting an extension of services from the building and construction sector, and funding is needed to support this excellent model to further meet the needs of men regardless of age who are working in the trades.

### ***The Tasmanian Men's Health & Wellbeing Association (TASMEN) perspective***

TASMEN has advocated for the employment of a full time Men's Health Policy Officer in Tasmania, by the state government and feels this is a positive step in addressing some of the many health issues faced by men in Tasmania. The person in this role is playing a vital role in developing a coordinated approach to the provision of quality health initiatives across the Tasmanian community with very limited resources. Increasing the resources of this valuable position would improve the implementation of targeted programs and to assist in gaining a better understanding of the issues currently facing men in the Tasmanian community. This commitment from the state is not currently supported with federal funding, though it is sincerely hoped that the development of the National Men's Health Policy by the Department of Health & Ageing will begin to provide direction and coordination needed to improve the health outcomes for all Australian men.

The Men's Services Network Tasmania was formed in 2006 by workers from several non-government organisations, and TASMEN is strongly involved in this network. This organisation has not received funding at this point, but with suitable funding, would be an effective tool in providing informed decisions concerning support services needed in Tasmania.

Anglicare Tasmania operates the *Tools for Men Program* for men who have experienced relationship or parenting difficulties, and TASMEN has had involvement in the past with this program.

Men and relationships is an area that needs serious attention. Men currently suffer exclusion and separation from children and family. Children suffer greatly due to the adversarial nature of the court system, the lack of legal aid being extended to male partners with most legal aid in Tasmania at least, tends to go towards women. Cultural and social norms dictate the women are the preferred provider of care for children denying the role of the father. Evidence has been gathered and clearly shows that children experience difficulties and do not do as well without significant male role models in their lives. Men are left devastated by the removal of access to children. Domestic violence reports reflect the charging of men for physical violence, while often ignoring the emotional and psychological violence that is often perpetrated by women. We do not condone physical violence by anyone, but call on the legal system and law enforcement agencies to address fairly the varying types of abuse that occur in Domestic situations rather than focusing purely on the more visible physical violence that is easier perhaps to act on.

TASMEN has recently completed a strategic plan which it is currently seeking funding to implement over the coming years. This document is attached below.

### ***Education awareness and research***

There are limited programs available to educate and increase awareness of men's health for men and the community. A 2007 Foundation 49 report stated that research clearly showed *"that at all levels of health service delivery in Australia there is an extreme inequity in the availability and delivery of health education to Australian men versus Australian women"* (Hardy 2007).

There is a specific need for education in the area of young men's/boy's sexual health and relationships beginning in childhood (Winckle 2008). Chlamydia rates in the youth of Tasmania are amongst the highest in the nation. The disbandment of the curriculum unit in the education department has meant decisions about relationship and sexual health education are made by the school. With teachers reluctant to tackle the difficult subjects and no professional development to assist them, young Tasmanians are being left to learn about these issues through their peers, and are not learning appropriate and healthy ways to manage themselves and their relationships.

There have been a number of men's health forums and events held in Tasmania during the last few years such as the Prostate Cancer Foundation Forum in Hobart in March 2007, and local events instigated by passionate people within local communities such as Huon Valley Men's Health night hosted by the local council in 2006. While such events have happened around the state, and bring a degree of benefit and awareness to men, there has been no coordinated approach or strategy and the longer term impacts of many of these events are unknown.

International Men's Health Week (IMHW) occurs in June. In Tasmania IMHW has been celebrated through local events organised by passionate individuals or hosted by Non-government organisations. Again there has been no strategy or themed approach to these events, and rarely has a specific health priority been promoted.

Men's Sheds offer a key opportunity for health promotion to older men in particular. Sheds are gaining in popularity and increasing in number. In Tasmania, individual sheds receive some funding through small grants and donations for items such as machinery or tools. Men's Sheds in Tasmania are currently forming an association, though to date Tasmanian Sheds have not received targeted support from any level of government. Women outnumber men in aged care facilities due to the early mortality of men relative to women, and so services tend to be focused on women. Sheds are one of the only widespread opportunities for men moving into later life stages, and are suitable for targeted funding and health promotion activities.

In the area of training, opportunities to train specifically in working with men in Tasmania have been rare indeed.

Research into men's health and wellbeing in Australia is scant with a ratio of articles on women's health to men's health being about 45:1 (Gregory Anne T 2006).

The lack of policy to date, along with the lack of research and evidence has meant there is minimal coordination or strategic effort to educate men and to promote health information and opportunities to men.

In moving forward with the development of Men's Health policies and programs, it is vitally important that a 'social determinants of health' understanding and approach is taken to men's health and wellbeing.

*"The social determinants of health are the circumstances in which people are born, grow up, live, work and age, and the systems put in place to deal with illness. These circumstances are in turn shaped by a wider set of forces: economics, social policies, and politics"* (WHO 2007).

The roles that men play as workers, fathers, partners, community members, and volunteers, all have an impact on their health and wellbeing, and need to be considered.

Recent studies show that men are interested and engaged in their health, but that many men experience barriers in their help-seeking. Many working men are unable to access services during working hours and services being closed outside of working hours, and a lack of male service providers are some of the barriers than many men experience to their maintaining their health (Smith, Braunack-Mayer et al. 2006).

Professor John McDonald argues that it is preferable to look at the provision of services to men, as well as making concerted efforts to support men as to how they should maintain their health (Macdonald 2006).

Attention needs to be focused on changing men's ideas about their health and to encourage them to engage early with health services. Changes in attitudes and social norms are required to encourage men to stay healthy and take responsibility for their health. One example of this is that men are often perceived to be risk takers in their alcohol consumption or with regards to injury. These perceptions are accepted social norms, and as such require efforts to change them into healthier approaches to health and wellbeing. These perceptions are the sort of social or environmental determinants that can significantly affect the health of the population including men.

*Much of the "causes" of health and illness in Tasmania – as elsewhere - lie outside of the health care system and are embedded in the social, political, economic and environmental contexts in which people find themselves.*  
(Taylor 2008)

### ***The adequacy of funding in metropolitan, rural and remote areas.***

A social determinants approach to men's health, as recommended by health experts in Australia and abroad, acknowledges that health outcomes are significantly affected by many social factors, some of which include employment status, social inclusion and support, addiction, food, and transport (Macdonald 2006). As mentioned above there is limited specific support available for men in the community.

A consultation conducted by Foundation 49 (Hardy 2007) in 2006 found that there were no specific services operating in Tasmania that were directed specifically at men. While this has begun to change in recent times, the lack of coordination and the ad hoc nature of activities addressing men's health have limited the positive outcomes from these activities.

Men's health and wellbeing in Tasmania is gaining increased attention and awareness is steadily growing of the importance of men's health and wellbeing for the community. The development of the national Men's Health Policy will provide opportunities for ideas and input from the community and all levels of government and health services, but it is essential that this policy be followed up with strategic direction and funding to help focus and build on the great work already being done. TASMEN looks forward to the improvements in the health and wellbeing of men as a result of increased and deserved attention by all levels of government on these important issues that affect the whole community.

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