



St Vincent's Health
Australia

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Committee Secretary
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Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Submission by St Vincent's Health Australia to the Senate Community Affairs Committee on Australia's domestic response to the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Commission on Social Determinants of Health report "Closing the Gap within a Generation".

Introduction

St Vincent's Health Australia (SVHA) welcomes the Senate Committee's interest in exploring a national response to the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health.

This submission to the Senate offers our perspective as a mainstream health provider which works closely with population groups experiencing significant health issues that often arise from systemic issues of poverty and marginalisation. Our submission does not, therefore, directly address the Inquiry's Terms of Reference but offers a practical perspective from a health and aged care service with a deep commitment to providing excellent health care through the lenses of the Social Determinants of Health.

St Vincent's Health Australia is fully supportive of, and endorses, the submission from Catholic Health Australia (CHA).

1. Who is St Vincent's Health Australia?

St Vincent's Health Australia is the nation's largest Catholic provider of diversified health and aged care in Australia comprising public and private hospitals providing acute and sub-acute care, two A1 Tertiary Teaching hospitals, internationally renowned research institutes, and an expanding presence in aged care. We are an innovative health provider with an outstanding reputation for compassionate care and clinical excellence.

Since 1857, our work in health care has been to serve all but especially those who experience both health and social vulnerabilities. We have a significant profile in Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander health and homeless people's health. Our purpose is clear: design and provide best practice health services for all people but especially those who are at the margins of society.

2. Why are we interested in the Social Determinants of Health?

St Vincent's Health Australia is adopting a Social Determinants of Health approach because the

evidence is clear that it is *systems* that influence health and wellbeing.¹ In working with our target population groups - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and chronically homeless people - our clinicians are mindful of the intergenerational nature of trauma that can lead to complex dual and even tri-morbidities.

Our staff connect patients to social service agencies, address housing and food security problems and assist people to reconnect with families or friends. Utilising the focus of the Social Determinants of Health, our clinical and health services staff are better equipped to understand the complexity of patient's lives and their social context. The intelligent and compassionate responses of our staff – in partnership with other providers – augment and complement excellent clinical care, assisting patients and residents to achieve better health outcomes.

We are extremely interested in an Australian Commission on the Social Determinants of Health. As a leading provider of health care for those experiencing health and social vulnerabilities, and with facilities across three States, we believe we can play a constructive role in the work of such a Commission.

3. The St Vincent's Health Australia Approach to the Social Determinants

In March 2012 St Vincent's Health Australia in consultation with leading community agencies developed a *Social Justice through Health Program*. The *Program* works directly with patients in three population groups linking three **Delivery Pathways: Clinical Care, Research and Advocacy**. This is an innovative approach in the acute hospital setting as it moves beyond the remediation of health issues to tackle some of the underlying causes that lead to some people experiencing health inequities to the point of untimely and preventable death.

The premise of the *Social Justice through Health Program* is to work toward **person centred systems change**. While the dignity of each person is the focus of our clinical care, we also work towards deep change in the patterns of injustice and poverty that lead to poor health outcomes for some population groups.

Two clinical strengths of St Vincent's are mental health and addiction medicine. As these health issues are often experienced by people who are socially isolated or living in poverty, we believe that we can play a leading role in evidence-based interventions that address the health and social nexus underlying these challenges.

Key to systems change is moving from clinical intervention and empowerment of individual patients, to training and capacity building health and social service agencies. St Vincent's Health Australia seeks, full and proactive participation in public policy discourse and policy setting forums.

Social justice happens by choice not by chance. As a leading provider of clinical education, St Vincent's Health Australia is uniquely placed to teach, train and shape the future health workforce to enable a critical mass of health professionals to adopt an approach to care shaped by the Social Determinants of Health.

4. What practical program responses are we developing?

To demonstrate the effectiveness of formally linking Clinical Care, Research and Advocacy as three Delivery Pathways for person centred systems change, St Vincent's Health Australia is strengthening its health services for vulnerable people, for example:

¹ For example see, Marmot, Michael and Richard G Wilkinson (Eds), *Social Determinants of Health*. Second Edition. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006; *Health Lies in Wealth: Health Inequalities of Australians of Working Age*. CHA and NATSEM Report, 2010; Lavery, Martin and Liz Callaghan, *Determining the Future: A Fair Go for All*. Connor Court Publishing, Ballan, 2011, amongst others.

- In designing health services for people experiencing chronic homelessness, SVHA provides innovative care services that include 'step up-step down' medi-cottages which provide intensive nursing care or assistance with treatment plans before going admission, or following discharge from hospital.
- We have a strong track record at St Vincent's in Melbourne of care coordination for homeless people with chronic diseases and those with complex mental health and/or addiction problems. Our Emergency Department in Melbourne developed the ALERT program (Assessment Liaison Early Referral Team); a multi-disciplinary team who identify patients with complex needs, and coordinate care including Mental Health, the medi-cottage, the Department of Addiction Medicine and other acute hospital interventions and services. ALERT has well established partnerships with a range of social service providers so that we aim to never discharge patients back into primary homelessness.
- At St Vincent's in Sydney, the 'Inner City Health Program' brings together Mental Health, Addiction Medicine, Homeless Health, and Community Health services under one clinical governance arrangement. Suggest: Clinicians from the multidisciplinary team provide services to homeless persons in the field, through health clinics in partnership with community providers, conduct health promotion activities and provide care through the medi-cottage.
- We have also recently commenced palliative care services to people in boarding houses in Brisbane.

5. Demonstrating innovation

St Vincent's Health Australia is committed to building on our traditional strengths in homeless people's health and Aboriginal health by expanding into the provision of health care for community residing asylum seekers. We have just completed a large Scoping Study into the health service needs of asylum seekers living in the three Eastern States and we are examining the possibility of providing general and mental health services to this group of people.

Secondly, we are looking into the possibility of introducing the role of Health Equity Managers at our public hospitals. Health Equity Managers, using the Social Determinants lenses, would be responsible for developing innovative care coordination linking Clinical Care, Research and Advocacy. They would work closely with social service partners to ensure continuity of care for vulnerable populations.

SVHA is interested in demonstrating that as a comprehensive service provider we are well placed to provide both patient centred care and address systemic change at a policy and service delivery level. The Health Equity Managers would work closely with Medicare Locals – given their role in ensuring equity of access - refining and strengthening the full range of health services from primary health through to acute health. Our research indicates that the provision of comprehensive health services for vulnerable populations, results in reduced acute in-patient bed time. Such services reduce costs to the acute hospital.² Offering enhanced services to vulnerable population groups will actually contribute to greater cost-effectiveness in our health care system.

SVHA would be very interested in piloting such a model in Melbourne and Sydney in 2013 should the Senate be interested.

² Cf., Moore, Gaye Elizabeth. *Assessing Risk Factors and Service Needs for Homelessness: Perspectives of Homeless People and Health Service Providers* (PhD thesis). School of Nursing and Social Work, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, the University of Melbourne, 2008.

6. Building an evidence base for health systems change

St Vincent's Health Australia is committed to contributing to research about effectiveness in health care for vulnerable populations that is cognisant of the social gradient that underpins the Social Determinants of Health approach.

SVHA has approached the Australian Institute of Health Innovation (AIHI) at the University of New South Wales about establishing a partnership, perhaps a Cooperative Research Centre (CRC), whose focus is on analysing effectiveness, quality, efficiency and affordability in our acute care hospitals which have a commitment to the Social Determinants of Health. SVHA, AIHI and CHA will explore the potential of developing a proposal for an NHMRC grant to support such systems analysis and improvement.

7. Conclusion

St Vincent's Health Australia has adopted an approach to working with vulnerable population groups informed by the principles of Social Justice and by the lenses of the Social Determinants of Health. We recognise that this is 'new territory' for the acute hospital sector both here in Australia and internationally. Therefore we are interested in convening a national and international Hub of Hospitals with a similar commitment so that we build a community of practice that advocates deep change; several hospitals within the Catholic Health Australia network have expressed interest in joining such a Hub.

St Vincent's Health Australia believes that the population as a whole will benefit greatly from the establishment of an Australian Commission on Social Determinants of Health, and that this Commission will play a pivotal role in shaping a more just Australia. We welcome the opportunity to speak with the Senate Committee should an opportunity become available.

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Social Justice – Policy and Practice