



Monday 26th February 2007

Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senator Mason,

**Re: Federal Government Inquiry into Human Services
(Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007**

The following organisations wish to make a joint submission to the Federal Government's Inquiry into Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007: Women's Health Victoria, the Centre for Adolescent Health, the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance, and Family Planning Victoria.

Collectively we work across regions, the State of Victoria and nationally on a wide variety of projects and topics. As four individual organisations we are united in our concern about the sexual and reproductive health and well-being of our communities.

As such, the focus of this submission is the impact changes in age and eligibility criteria that the proposed Access Card will have on the sexual and reproductive health of young Australians, and in particular, young women.

Using a Medicare card, access to government-funded health services is available to people aged 16 years or older. Through the introduction of the Access Card, the Government will restrict this access to those 18 years and above. This jump in age eligibility will mean that an additional 533,000 Australian's (aged 16 and 17 years, according to the 2001 Census) will be significantly disadvantaged. This does not take into account the 1.6 million people aged 10-15 years who will be excluded from accessing confidential health and welfare services.

The proposed Access Card age criteria are inconsistent with the current provisions for a Medicare card. Under the proposed Access Card they will not be entitled to receive the current benefits, rebates and services under the Medicare provision,

unless with the consent of an adult. Access to confidential health services has been overwhelmingly confirmed as an essential component (see Sancu et al 2005) of health consultations with young people, especially in regard to sensitive issues such as sexual and reproductive health, sexual assault, drug use, family violence and mental health.

In addition, it is compulsory to present the Access Card to receive these benefits and rebates. Therefore people aged less than 18 years will not have access to current benefits, services, treatments and rebates. This will negatively effect young people's access to basic standard health services in Australia.

Research demonstrates that young people continue to need, and rely on, access to medical and other health professionals for information and help. An extensive survey of Australian Secondary Students about HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health conducted by Smith *et al*, show that just over 22% of students surveyed reported that doctors play a prominent role in the provision of advice to students about contraception (2003: 82). The researchers note that the use of doctors as sources of health information about sexual health issues is relatively low in the survey findings compared to other studies, that have shown that 'young people place high trust in the information health care professionals are able to provide' (2003: 95). The report highlights that 'by the time young people reach Year 10 (aged 15 and 16 years) the majority are sexually active in some way, with nearly 40 per cent engaged in oral sex and over a quarter having sexual intercourse. By Year 12 just under half of all students are having sexual intercourse' (Smith *et al.*, 2003:97). These findings emphasise the real need for unrestricted access to confidential evidence-based health services, rebates and information, particularly about sexual and reproductive health from the age of 16 years that does not require the consent and/or presence of a guardian.

The importance of access to confidential health services in young people's decision to use those services was highlighted by recent research undertaken by the Centre for Adolescent Health, Family Planning Victoria and the Royal Women's Hospital (*The Sexual and Reproductive Health of Young Victorians*, 2005). The report identified lack of access as the most pressing barrier to health services for young people. Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children and young people have the right to access health care. The introduction of the proposed Access Card would diminish the right of young people to confidential evidence based health care services, which would compromise their access to quality health care. .

The proposed provision regarding age eligibility states that a young person may apply to the Secretary of the Department of Human Services for an Access Card. The criteria for successful application have not been specified nor have potential reasons the Secretary of the Department may decline an application. Nor does it reflect the additional barriers this puts in place for young people to access health services. This would effectively discriminate against young people's access to health care for sensitive health care needs..


We believe that people under 18 years of age should be 'eligible' and have the right to 'entitlement' of an Access card as in the current Medicare Provision, not a 'right to apply'. Removal of age barriers is essential for accessing basic standard health services and treatment, information, rebates. There needs to be a consistent and sustained focus on removing provisions that disadvantage and negatively impact on the health and wellbeing of younger members of the community.

The organisations that are signatories to this submission believe the Federal Government Access Card Bill should not proceed and we do not support the implementation of the Federal Government Access Card Bill 2007, particularly as it excludes younger people as being authorised and/or eligible and entitled to access current services in the Medicare provision.

Yours faithfully,



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Copy sent to:

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Senator the Hon. Judith Troeth
Senator Natasha Stott Despoja
Senator Lyn Allison

References:

Australian Government Office of Access Card: <http://www.accesscard.gov.au/>

L Sanci, SM Sawyer, M Kang, D Haller-Hester, G Patton (2005). Confidential health care for adolescents: reconciling clinical evidence with family values. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 183:410-414.

Smith, A., Agius, P., Dyson, S., Mitchell, A. and Pitts, M. (2003) Secondary Students and Sexual Health: Results of the Third National Survey of Australia Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health. La Trobe University, Melbourne.

The Sexual and Reproductive Health of Young Victorians (2005). Adolescent Health, Family Planning Victoria and the Royal Women's Hospital.