

Development of the Five Year Victorian Women's Health Plan

This issue of the Australian Journal of Primary Health-Interchange is a special issue for the publication of papers presented at the Victorian Women's Health Conference held in Melbourne between 9-10th June, 1998. For many of us involved in the organisation of the conference, we were overwhelmed by the interest in it. My involvement was as chairperson of the Victorian Women's Health Plan Consultation and Communication Committee.

The Conference was a joint event held by the Victorian Department of Human Services and the Victorian Ministerial Advisory Committee on Women's Health (MACWH) as part of the development of the Victorian Women's Health Plan. This Plan was initiated by the Minister of Health, Rob Knowles, in August 1997 when he asked the MACWH to:

- set priorities and actions for the next five years which, if implemented would make a demonstrable difference for Victorian women's health;
- focus the Plan within the Health and Community Services Sector which was in the Ministers power to implement;
- include holding a women's health conference early in 1998; and
- deliver the plan by November 1998 (For launch in early 1999).

The VWHP Conference was designed to provide an opportunity for discussion about strategic directions for the Plan among women's health experts and key Victorian stakeholders in women's health. The Conference objective was to inform on

effective service models and propose strategic directions which could improve health outcomes for women. It was one component of a much larger framework for the Plan's development.

The call for papers attracted over 350 abstracts. Of these, about 70 were able to be accommodated for presentation into the conference two day program through structuring more time for smaller streams. The need to keep the registration fee low if we were to facilitate access to a broad range of women was recognised early and made possible by Departmental support.

750 registrants attended the Conference after a decision by the organising committee to close registrations a week before the event. I thought the response was amazing and a very clear affirmation of the level of activity, interest and knowledge in a gendered approach to health, in this case women's health.

The Conference reporters' notes, taken by allocated people through all of the sessions, were compiled into a report. This was summarised and included for discussion at the regional consultation luncheons for local stakeholders and service providers. In addition, the VWHP task groups developing the six theme - based chapters were given the conference summary relevant to their theme for consideration in the theme chapter.

Briefly, some of the issues raised in the Conference were:

- women's health work as developed in Australia over the last decade is recognised internationally;
- there continues to be significant evidence of gender bias in research and reforms;
- the need to really come to grips with women's diversity in all its forms - race,

class, geographical location, political views, sexual preference - and work positively with this diversity if women's health status is to be improved;

- there is a need for the Women's Health Plan to be effective across the whole health system so that service provision is explicitly gendered, with changes that are sustainable over a long time;
- the health system has to be made to work intersectorially in the first instance, and then seek to work across public policy areas to impact on a better health outcome within a social view of health;
- women's health can supply models of best practice for public health generally, not only for women; and

- best practice criteria were identified in a number of the papers. In particular the evaluation processes of the outcome of services will be of interest.

In addition to including the Conference report in the Plan's development, we wanted to make the papers available to a wider audience. This has been made possible through this Special Edition of the Journal. All speakers were invited to contribute their paper and it is a great pleasure to be able to publish 19 of them.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Minister, the many Departmental officers who committed so much of their time and the Conference Committee members from the MACWH for making the Conference possible.

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