

Submission

Draft Western Australian Women's Health and Wellbeing Policy

23 July 2019

AHCWA welcomes the Western Australian Government's development of a State Women's Health and Wellbeing Policy (the policy) as part of its commitment to achieving the shared vision and strategic priorities of the *National Women's Health Strategy 2020-2030*.

The Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA) is the peak body for 23 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs) providing primary health services across diverse regional, rural and remote locations in Western Australia. AHCWA exists to support and act on behalf of our 23 Member ACCHSs, and our principal vision is for Aboriginal people in WA to enjoy the same level of health and wellbeing as all Western Australians.

AHCWA has been represented on the Western Australian Women's Health and Wellbeing Policy Working Group and, further to verbal advice already provided, would like to take this opportunity to provide formal written feedback on the policy.

The Policy Overview

- The overview to the policy makes repeated reference to partnerships, interagency collaboration, and efforts across WA Health Services and communities to improve health outcomes for women.
- ACCHSs are key stakeholders in the delivery of women's health services, and are deeply invested in partnerships across the government and non-government sectors to enhance the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal women.
- ACCHSs continually demonstrate their expertise in Aboriginal primary health service provision and their ability to achieve improved health outcomes with Aboriginal people, however, there is no mention of ACCHSs in the policy at all.
- While sections of the policy mention Aboriginal-led services, AHCWA is very concerned that it does not identify ACCHS as being best placed to develop and deliver services for Aboriginal people as stated by the Department of Health (DoH) in its Sustainable Health Review.
- AHCWA strongly advises that the policy be amended to recognise the importance of ACCHSs in the WA health sector, and to highlight the opportunities ACCHSs present for improving health outcomes for Aboriginal women in:
 - maternal, sexual and reproductive health;
 - social and emotional wellbeing;
 - prevention and management of chronic conditions;
 - prevention of gender-based violence and support for victims; and
 - promotion of health ageing.
- The essential role of ACCHSs in developing and delivering Aboriginal health services could be acknowledged and supported in action plans for implementing the policy. However, AHCWA has received feedback from the Health Networks Team at DoH that implementing the policy is not

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Page 1 of 5

mandatory for the health sector. AHCWA is unsure of the utility of the policy if there are no formal plans for implementation.

- The policy doesn't provide sufficient detail on how the DoH intends to evaluate the policy. Further information about how the impacts of the policy will be measured may clarify the utility of the policy for health services.

Guiding Principles

Women Centred Care

- AHCWA supports women being at the centre of programs, services and support which promote health, safety and wellbeing.
- In its draft form, the policy states that health services need to be 'flexible, respectful and responsive to the preferences and needs of the individual woman and the cultures of their communities', however, the policy does not detail how this will be achieved.
- WA ACCHSs deliver services to Aboriginal women and their communities using a holistic Model of Care, developed and delivered by Aboriginal people. The Model of Care recognises that Aboriginal people's health and wellbeing is influenced by a range of interconnected and inseparable elements including; family, community, culture, language, country, physical wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing, and emotional wellbeing.
- The WA ACCHS Model of Care has been provided to the Health Networks Team at DoH; AHCWA recommends that it be used to inform the policy, particularly as it refers to health services being delivered to Aboriginal women.

Inclusion and Respect

- AHCWA supports the guiding principle of 'inclusion and respect' in the draft policy, and its recognition that 'some population groups experience stigma, discrimination, and/or racism' when accessing health services.
- Aboriginal people continue to experience institutional racism in many mainstream services which is directly related to poorer health outcomes.
- WA ACCHS provide culturally secure services to Aboriginal women, however, it is essential that Aboriginal women accessing mainstream services are also able to receive culturally secure care and support.
- While the guiding principles aim to 'improve the cultural and language competency of health services', and the draft policy repeatedly refers to the need for 'culturally secure practices' and 'culturally appropriate education', a clearer commitment to how this will be achieved is required.

Health Equity and Access

- AHCWA supports the policy's recognition of the challenges that women who live in regional, rural and remote WA experience in accessing health services, and that a key aim of the policy is to address the gaps in service delivery across the state.
- Of particular concern for Aboriginal women in rural and remote communities is access to:
 - appropriate family and domestic violence support, including health care and refuge accommodation;
 - preventative programs for chronic conditions and cancers;
 - screening services for maternal, sexual and reproductive health; and
 - social and emotional wellbeing support, including crisis care and suicide prevention programs.

Workforce Capacity Building

- AHCWA welcomes the policy's recognition of the need for a skilled Aboriginal workforce to deliver health services in partnership with Aboriginal people.
- Given the policy is focused on the health and wellbeing of women, it seems appropriate that the policy would support women being given choice about the gender of health professionals or support workers they may come into contact with.
- Ensuring the workforce is sensitive to the needs of women is particularly relevant for Aboriginal women, particularly when health matters are 'women's business'. In these instances it may be highly inappropriate for men to be involved in an Aboriginal woman's care.
- This gender-sensitivity may be captured under 'gender-responsive' health services, however, this term is not yet defined in the policy.

Prevention, Promotion and Early Intervention

- AHCWA strongly supports the prevention, promotion and early intervention focus of the policy as it demonstrates a positive approach to women's health and wellbeing in the future and avoids viewing issues from a deficit perspective.

A Holistic Approach

- AHCWA strongly supports the commitment of the policy to account for the various determinants of health impacting on women across WA.
- As previously stated, ACCHSs approach the provision of health services and support for Aboriginal people with a holistic perspective. The Model of Care provides a framework for broader elements of a person's life to be considered when working to improve their health, and social and emotional wellbeing.
- ACCHSs also consider environmental elements that have impacts on the health of Aboriginal people. For example, inadequate hygiene facilities in housing, poor housing maintenance including the presence of mould, domestic waste management issues, and the presence of dust and plant particles has significant impacts on the health of Aboriginal women.
- Health professionals providing services for Aboriginal women must consider the ongoing legacy of intergenerational trauma, institutional racism and intergenerational disadvantage on their health and wellbeing. This is one of the reasons culturally secure services are integral when working with Aboriginal women and communities to improve health outcomes.
- Consideration must also be given to financial pressures experienced by Aboriginal women in the health and wellbeing policy. For example, financial disadvantage often results in the inability to pay for prescribed medicines or to cover the comparatively high cost of healthy food options.

A Life Course Approach

- AHCWA is very concerned that 'Chronic Conditions and Preventative Health' and 'Health Ageing' have been amalgamated in the most recent version of the policy.
- Any policies targeting chronic conditions should recognise women of all age groups have the potential to develop chronic conditions. Chronic conditions and ageing are not synonymous.
- AHCWA supports the intent of the policy to have a life course approach and agrees, as discussed by the Women's Health and Wellbeing Policy Working Group, that key aims for Healthy Ageing can be referenced across all key priority areas for women's health in the policy. However, this should not preclude the policy from having a separate priority area for Healthy Ageing.

Priority Areas

Priority Area A: Health and Wellbeing Impacts of Gender-based Violence

- AHCWA supports the inclusion of gender-based violence as a priority area for the policy as it acknowledges the seriousness of family and domestic violence as a social determinant of health for women.
- ACCHSs provide frontline care and support for Aboriginal women experiencing gender-based violence but report an ongoing lack of appropriate crisis response options for women in rural and remote locations.

Priority Area B: Healthy ageing and chronic conditions

- As previously stated, AHCWA doesn't support the amalgamation of Healthy Ageing and Chronic Conditions under the same priority area. AHCWA submits the following information to be considered in the drafting of the policy:

Healthy Ageing:

- AHCWA strongly supports the policy promoting opportunities for healthy ageing.
- A holistic awareness of culture and community positions ACCHSs in a key position to provide the meaningful and effective healthy ageing support for Aboriginal women.
- Aboriginal people develop dementia at a significantly higher rate than non-aboriginal people, and experience physical frailty earlier in their life course as a result of chronic conditions, socioeconomic disadvantage and poorer social and emotional wellbeing.
- Aboriginal women who are Elders in their communities often hold significant responsibilities which may have impacts for their health. For example, Elder women are likely to prioritise caring duties for kin and community over attending health appointments.

Chronic Conditions:

- AHCWA strongly supports the prevention of chronic disease as a key health policy objective. Aboriginal women experience very high instances of chronic disease across WA particularly in relation to Diabetes Mellitus, Renal Disease, Heart Diseases and Respiratory Diseases caused by smoking or environmental factors (for example, exposure to red dust over extended periods of time).
- Aboriginal women require timely and easy access to cancer screening programs, particularly for lung and cervical cancers. Delays to quality testing services can result in later diagnosis, and poorer prognoses and survival rates for Aboriginal women.
- ACCHSs currently deliver evidence informed chronic condition prevention and management services to Aboriginal women across WA and it is recommended that the policy recognises and promotes this.
- AHCWA recommends that any women's health programs targeting chronic conditions which may involve Aboriginal women, ensure information about the program is provided in culturally appropriate language.

Priority Area C: Maternal, sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing

- Maternal, sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing are key focus areas for Aboriginal primary health care. ACCHSs partner with Aboriginal women and their communities to deliver culturally secure services addressing these areas.

- AHCWA and its Member Services deliver sexual health promotion and education programs for Aboriginal women targeting sexually transmitted infection (STI) and blood borne virus (BBV) prevention. AHCWA supports the inclusion of the Birds and the BBV's program as an exemplary program in the policy.
- AHCWA supports the policy's focus on safe sex, respectful relationships and respect for sexual diversity education for women but notes there are important cultural considerations when working with Aboriginal women and girls. As noted previously, some health issues are sensitive and can only be discussed by women or by people over a certain age.
- ACCHSs work closely with Aboriginal women in maintaining maternal health across the pregnancy and birthing journey. ACCHSs understand the importance that many Aboriginal women place on 'birthing on country', and facilitate midwifery programs which prevent women having to travel to urban centres when delivering their babies.
- Aboriginal women are able to involve family and other support people in the birthing process which is integral to social and emotional wellbeing.
- ACCHS also assist in naturalising the birthing process rather than propagating a medicalised model of pregnancy and birthing.

Priority Area D: Mental Health and Wellbeing

- Mainstream concepts of mental health and mental illness are limited in considering all factors impacting on wellness. As noted by the draft policy, Aboriginal people prefer the concept of social and emotional wellbeing as it is based on a holistic view of health. AHCWA recommends providing mental health support for Aboriginal women from a social and emotional wellbeing perspective as this is most likely to result in better outcomes.
- ACCHS are best placed to provide social and emotional wellbeing services and support for Aboriginal women, and to drive the outcomes the policy aims to achieve.
- ACCHSs work within a shared cultural understanding of their communities and build community capacity for self-determination which assists Aboriginal women to realise their full potential as individuals, and as members of their community.
- Where Aboriginal women access mainstream services, it is imperative that there is an enhanced focus on improving the cultural appropriateness of the mental health sector.
- While the draft policy provides support for the current WA State Government suicide prevention strategy, Suicide Prevention 2020, the policy must also recognise and promote the forthcoming WA Suicide Prevention Action Plan due for release early next year.

Women's Health Infographic

- AHCWA recommends careful consideration be given to the selection of statistics demonstrating health challenges and outcomes for Aboriginal woman. Infographics must send a clear message on women's health issues and must not be ambiguous or open to misinterpretation.
- AHCWA is very concerned about the incorrect use of infographics in a previous draft of the policy which was very ambiguous about incarceration rates of Aboriginal women in WA.