



Submission to the review on a new national women's health policy for Australia

2020women welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the development of a new National Women's Health Policy for Australia. 2020women was founded in August 2009 to promote the equality of women. We do this through practical means that include sharing women's stories and dreams, by conducting surveys and giving women the opportunity to voice their opinions on issues that affect them.

We commend the government's commitment to the National Women's Health Policy (NWHP) and we are pleased to note that gender inequalities are being recognised and that action to redress the health inequalities faced by women.

We support the submissions to this review from **WomenSpeak** and from the **Australian Women's Health Network**, and agree that the following recommendations from those submissions are particularly important to ensuring that the health needs of women are met.

- Recognise and respond to gender as a fundamental social determinant of health
- Re-position health policy towards effective provision of preventive primary health care and support services for women's health
- Provide funding to increase services available for all women's health problems, specifically addressing the needs of older and younger women, and carers
- Redress the health inequities experienced by women with disabilities
- Provide funding to expand the number and the geographical spread of community based women's health services
- Establish a gender health unit within the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to improve and increase gender and diversity-sensitive research and monitoring of women's health
- Address the health impacts of violence against women within all national health policies and the policies of other relevant portfolios
- Include elimination of violence against women as a priority in the National Men's Health Policy
- Develop and fund a National Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy
- Ensure that the health and wellbeing needs and experiences of vulnerable populations of women are specifically addressed in each aspect of the new NWHP; Indigenous women's health is particularly poor and is consistently at a low level, even by international standards and additional thought must be given in the new health policy to new and more inclusive strategic at the local level to address this
- Actively promote the participation of women in health decision making and management
- Collect disaggregated data to inform planning, policy development, changes to legislation, programs and services

Our main concern in relation to the new policy is the need to provide preventative health care and policies that have a broader focus than past health policies, which have concentrated mostly on the treatment of ill-health. Preventative health still lags in Australia, and there is a pressing need for evidence-based systems for evaluating and incorporating new health information and technologies into existing health care systems in Australia providing a focus on preventative health. There is also a need to take into account infrastructure issues, for example, in rural areas there is a desperate need for infrastructure such as transport and communications to provide better support maternity services.

Health policy needs to take account of climate change and the economic context as health care costs rise. Other issues that need to be addressed by the NWHP are listed below.

- Dental care is not accessible to many Australian women due to increased costs.
- Occupational health and safety for women in Australia is adversely impacted by the fact that women participate in a relatively narrow range of occupations (such as nursing, childcare, retail) many being physically and intellectually stressful.
- Health outcomes for women in rural and remote regions are not as good as those in urban areas. Indigenous women are by far the worst affected by the unequal experience of health improvements in recent decades.
- The ageing workforce in Australia also affects health outcomes; particularly as the nursing and caring workforces age, presenting further risks in the future.
- There is room for improvement in maternal care, which is a potent determinant of child health and well-being outcomes. Consideration should be given to providing ante and post-natal maternal and child welfare visiting programs, and ante-natal classes for prospective parents and visiting programs.
- Mental health also requires more focussed attention, with suicide now a major cause of death, particularly in rural areas.

Aged care funding requires review, recognising the increased role women play as carers of their ageing parents, and to ensure appropriate levels of respite care are available.

Women in rural and regional Australia are particularly vulnerable as they lack any cohesive access to services regarded as standard in the cities and towns. Childbirth support is problematic depending on location, and women still have to travel considerable distances to access facilities of a reasonable standard. The number of neonatal beds provided supporting birthing facilities is commonly inadequate as well. Continuity of care from ante-natal, birthing and post-natal services is needed.

Wider access to broader health services and support is also reduced outside the larger centres in spite of the growth of the 'super clinics,' which may diminish this problem in some areas.

The general information impoverishment of regional women about services and how to access them as well as the lack of immediately available services must be addressed. This issue will continue to grow as the population spreads outside the bigger towns up and down the Eastern seaboard and coastal communities swell in size but not corresponding quickly enough in services. Also the health workforce ages,

Lastly, an ongoing role for consumers in the further development of government health policies is needed, particularly in areas of women's health such as maternity services.