



## A National Sexual & Reproductive Health Strategy?

**A group of three prominent organisations are advocating to the Australian government for the creation of a National Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy. They have requested AFAO's endorsement of their proposal. This paper briefly summarises their arguments for the creation of a Strategy as articulated in their background paper titled 'Time for a National Sexual & Reproductive Health Strategy for Australia'. The deadline for endorsement is 14 March 2008.**

### Background

In 2007 three organisations formed a Reference Group with the intention of lobbying the Australian Federal Government to create a National Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy. The organisations involved are:

- The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA)
- Sexual Health & Family Planning Australia (SHaFPA)
- Australian Reproductive Health Alliance (ARHA)

Kerryn O'Rourke (a Public Health Fellow with the Victorian Public Health Training Scheme) drafted the background paper on behalf of the Reference Group. The paper was circulated in February 2008, alongside requests for endorsement.

The background paper was not drafted with broader community consultation; nor is there provision for consultation in the current request for endorsement.

### Arguments for a National Sexual & Reproductive Health Strategy

The background paper refers a report published by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care in 2000 which recommended the development of a comprehensive national sexual health strategy<sup>1</sup>. It argues that Australia 'lags' behind other countries which have developed national strategies for Sexual and Reproductive Health (including Denmark, Sweden, Canada, England, Scotland and New Zealand). It is worth noting that some of these countries also have as part of their national strategic framework separate HIV strategies (including Sweden, England and New Zealand).

As part of its argument for a comprehensive strategy, the paper articulates a series of pressing issues that are currently not being addressed. These include:

- Increasing rates of sexual activity in adolescents and young people
- Inconsistent access to and use of contraceptives
- Increasing sexual vulnerability associated with problematic substance use
- Sexual violence associated with poor health outcomes
- Australia's relatively high rate of teenage births and the associated risk of poor pregnancy, social, economic and health outcomes
- Higher comparative estimated abortion rates
- Uncertainty and variation in the legal status of abortion between states and territories
- Increasing rates of sexually transmissible infections and newly acquired HIV infection
- High rates of infertility
- Mental health problems associated with sexual and reproductive issues (e.g. homophobia and suicide in same sex attracted young men)
- Sexual and reproductive health issues disproportionately affecting certain population groups (e.g. young people, people with disabilities, Indigenous people)
- The economic burden of sexual and reproductive ill health to individuals and communities

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In addition, the paper argues that the current policy environment for sexual and reproductive health is not best practice. It argues that current policies:

- Focus on single issues, usually diseases, and neglect the promotion of broader sexual and reproductive health
- Do not address social determinants of sexual and reproductive health
- Are not developed with appropriate community participation
- Mistakenly aim to alter health outcomes in isolation
- Fail to link inter-dependent strategies appropriately
- Result in a limited range of available sexual and reproductive health services
- Fail to address several key issues in sexual and reproductive health (including unplanned pregnancy, differences in sexual health legislation between states, the absence of minimum standards in sexual health education, sexualised media representation of girls and women, significant gaps in accurate and comprehensive data on which to base policies and evaluation).

### Key Contents of a National Strategy

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The background paper argues that a national sexual and reproductive health strategy should contain the following:

- Core teaching standards and minimum standards for relationships and sexual health education
- Consistent national minimum data collection of key sexual and reproductive health indicators
- Full burden of disease assessment and economic evaluation of a national strategy
- A national research program and national clearinghouse on sexual and reproductive health
- Provision of a full range of contraception and community information strategies
- Sexual and reproductive health services and workforce development
- Legal, safe, accessible and affordable pregnancy termination services.

### Potential Issues

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At the AFAO AGM in November 2007, a session on National Strategies asked members to articulate their thoughts and concerns around the proposal for a National Sexual Health and Reproductive Health Strategy.

The major concern focused on the positioning of the proposed strategy in relation to the National HIV/AIDS Strategy. The background paper does not explicitly state what relationship would exist between a National Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy and a National HIV Strategy, though it does imply that at the least the new strategy would act to co-ordinate the HIV Strategy with other strategies. The Public Health Association has also confirmed that subsuming the National HIV/AIDS Strategy is not its intention.

In addition to concerns regarding the creation of a possible 'umbrella strategy', AFAO members expressed reservations regarding the utility and funding of a National Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy. Some members articulated that their concern that a mammoth' strategy would not be able to adequately direct and inform appropriate responses. There was also concern that (as with other strategies) it would be created without appropriate funding allocated, thereby diminishing its effectiveness.

### References

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K O'Rourke, 'Time for a national sexual and reproductive health strategy for Australia – Background Paper'. February 2008, Public Health Association of Australia, Sexual Health & Family Planning Australia, Australian Reproductive Health Alliance.

<sup>1</sup> McCallum, L., J. McDonald, and D.G. Neilson, *Analysis of current national sexual health related activities, policies and programs funded by the Commonwealth: Consultation on the appropriateness and scope of a national sexual health strategy*. 2000, Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care: Canberra.