Submission

on

Men's Health

to the

Senate Select Committee on Men's Health

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8 March 2009

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1. Introduction

Pursuant to a motion by Senator Cori Bernardi the Senate has established a Select Committee on Men's Health to inquire into general issues related to the availability and effectiveness of education, supports and services for men's health, including but not limited to:

- the level of Commonwealth, state and other funding addressing men's health, particularly prostate cancer, testicular cancer, and depression,
- adequacy of existing education and awareness campaigns regarding men's health for both men and the wider community,
- prevailing attitudes of men towards their own health and sense of wellbeing and how these are affecting men's health in general, and
- the extent, funding and adequacy for treatment services and general support programs for men's health in metropolitan, rural, regional and remote areas.

The Committee has called for public submissions which are due by 13 March 2009. The Committee is due to report to the Senate on 30 May 2009.

FamilyVoice Australia is a national organisation with a particular interest in the family, marriage and parenthood. This submission seeks to address aspects of men's health relevant to our interests.

2. Fatherlessness

Boys growing up without a father are at higher risk of adverse health outcomes.

Experiments in Living: the Fatherless Family, by social scientist Rebecca O'Neill, reports a range of findings about the adverse health impacts on children, teenagers and young adults associated with fatherlessness.[1]

"After controlling for other demographic factors, children living in lone-parent households were 1.8 times as likely to have psychosomatic health symptoms and illness such as pains, headaches, stomach aches, and feeling sick."[2]

According to the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, boys from lone-parent households were 1.8 times more likely to have had intercourse before the age of 16 when compared with boys from two-natural-parent households. After controlling for socio-economic status, level of communication with parents and educational levels, the comparative odds of underage sex actually increased to 2.29.[3]

"In a sample of British 16-year-olds, those living in lone-parent households were 1.5 times as likely to smoke. Controlling for sex, household income, time spent with family, and relationship with parents, actually increased the odds that a teenager from a lone-parent family would smoke (to 1.8 times as likely)." [4]

"A Swedish study found that children of single parent families were 30% more likely to die over the 16-year study period. After controlling for poverty, children from single-parent families were: 70% more likely to have circulatory problems, 56% more likely to show signs of mental illness, 27% more likely to report chronic aches and pains, and 26% more likely to rate their health as poor."[5]

Male adolescents in all types of families without a biological father (mother only, mother and step-father, and other) were more likely to be incarcerated than teens from two-parent homes, even when demographic information was included in analyses. Youths who had never lived with their father had the highest odds of being arrested.[6]

Incarceration is associated with poorer health outcomes. "The results of one major Australian study showed the overall death rate for men with a prison history was 4 times that of men in the general community. Most of these extra deaths result from suicide, drug and alcohol abuse and homicide, and occur within the first few weeks of release from prison."[7]

"Virtually every major social pathology has been linked to fatherlessness: violent crime, drug and alcohol abuse, truancy, teen pregnancy, suicide—all correlate more strongly to fatherlessness than to any other single factor. The majority of prisoners, juvenile detention inmates, high school dropouts, pregnant teenagers, adolescent murderers, and rapists all come from fatherless homes. The connection is so strong that controlling for fatherlessness erases the relationships between race and crime and between low income and crime...." [8]

Health prevention for men requires consistent support for the importance of fathers for boys' wellbeing.

In particular, more needs to be done to ensure that the presumption of equal shared parental responsibility incorporated in the Family Law Act 1975 (Section 61DA) is more frequently applied in such a way that boys (and girls for that matter) spend equal, or at least significant and substantial time, with their fathers (cf. Section 65DAA).

Recommendation 1:

The application of Sections 61DA and 65DAA of the Family Law Act 1975 be reviewed in the light of the adverse health outcomes for boys who are deprived of significant and substantial contact with their fathers, to ensure that children whose parents separate or divorce have the opportunity to spend significant and substantial time with their fathers.

3. Boy's education and adverse health effects

"The Australian Council for Educational Research notes a number of areas of concern over boys' school experiences that have adverse impacts on their development and degree of social integration.

The major problems include:

- Boys are 9 times more likely to be referred to paediatricians at tertiary referral hospitals for behavioural problems, including Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD). Further, 20% of referrals relate to learning difficulties.

- Boys are subject to more disciplinary actions during schooling, are more likely to participate in subsequent delinquent behaviours, alcohol and substance abuse, and during adolescence, are 4–5 times more likely than girls to suffer from depression and commit suicide.

- Boys have a higher prevalence of auditory processing problems. Unless appropriate classroom management strategies are put in place, these problems impact negatively on their early literacy achievement and subsequent progress, as well as their behaviours.

- Boys constitute between 75–85 per cent of those children (usually in Grades 1 or 2) identified 'at-risk' of poor achievement progress in literacy.

- Boys are significantly more disengaged with schooling and more likely to be at risk of academic underachievement.

- Boys are more likely to 'drop out' of schooling prematurely. Between 1994 and 1998, 30% of boys failed to complete their secondary schooling.

- Post school, men are more likely to be unemployed than females.

This consideration highlights the difficulties in addressing determinants of health. Alongside immediate concerns for boys, there can be long-term social implications of schooling experiences for boys.

Alienation from learning for many boys will have flow-on effects on their economic, social and emotional well-being for life."[9]

The most recent ABS data (2006) indicates that the proportion of FTE (full time equivalent) male teachers in primary schools has fallen a further 3.6% in the ten years from 1996 to 2006 to a new low of just 20.2%. Only one out of five primary school teachers are male. Many boys – including those from fatherless homes may graduate from primary school without ever having a male teacher.

The same trend is evident in the data for secondary school teachers with a drop of 4% in male teachers over the ten year period to 43.4%.[10]

A New South Wales survey of early childhood education staff, students and parents found that "over 90 per cent indicated that they would welcome more male staff in the early childhood care and education workforce". [11]

This issue was addressed by Liberal Senators in their recent dissenting report on the Effectiveness of the Sex Discrimination Act 1984:

> 1.17 Liberal Senators are concerned by evidence that educational outcomes for boys are lagging behind outcomes for girls and consider that redressing the imbalance between male and female teachers is a key means of improving outcomes for boys.
>
> 1.18 At present, the Act prohibits targeted initiatives aimed at increasing the number of male teachers on the basis that they discriminate against women…
>
> 1.19 Liberal Senators … noted the submission made by Family Voice Australia that the Act should be amended as proposed (by the Coalition) by the Sex Discrimination Amendment (Teaching Profession) Bill 2004. This would involve inserting a section to provide that "… a person may offer scholarships for persons of a particular gender in respect of participation in a teaching course." The section would apply only if the purpose of doing so is to redress a gender imbalance in teaching—that is, an imbalance in the ratio of male to female teachers in schools in Australia or in a category of schools or in a particular school.
>
> 1.20 Accordingly Liberal Senators consider there is merit in the principle espoused above.[12]
>
> ***Recommendation 2:***
>
> ***In order to allow schools to redress the lack of male teachers, the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 should be amended to exempt the offering of scholarships for this purpose.***

4. Men and marriage

Marriage socialises men in important ways which impact favourably on men's health.

The Centre for Marriage and Families reports on some of the benefits to men's wellbeing from marriage. "Married men drink less, fight less, and are less likely to engage in criminal activity than their single peers. Married husbands and fathers are significantly more involved and affectionate with their wives and children than men in cohabiting relationships (with and without children). The norms, status rewards, and social support offered to men by marriage all combine to help men walk down the path to adult responsibility."[13]

An Australian Bureau of Statistics study reported that in 1996 married people overall experienced lower death rates than those who were divorced, widowed or never married. Males aged between 20 and 69 years who had never married experienced death rates two to four times higher than those who were married.[14]

> ***Recommendation 3:***
>
> ***That all public policy be evaluated in terms of its impact on encouraging marriage. Relationships education in primary and secondary school should positively promote marriage as beneficial to the wellbeing of men, women, children and society. Laws which diminish the unique status of marriage by treating cohabiting and same-sex relationships as functionally equivalent to marriage should be reviewed.***

5. Men and divorce

Suicide epidemiologist, Augustine Kposowa, using data from the US National Longitudinal Mortality Study, found that divorced and separated men were nearly 2.4 times more likely to kill themselves than their married counterparts.[15]

"Divorced men are nearly 9.7 times as likely to kill themselves as divorced women… Why are divorced men killing themselves? … In many jurisdictions … there seems to be an implicit assumption that the bond between a woman and her children is stronger than that between a man and his children. As a consequence, in a divorce settlement, custody of children is more likely to be given to the wife. In the end, the father loses not only his marriage, but his children. The result may be anger at the court system especially in situations wherein the husband feels betrayed because it was the wife that initiated the divorce, or because the courts virtually gave away everything that was previously owned by the ex-husband or the now defunct household to the former wife. Events could spiral into resentment (toward the spouse and 'the system'), bitterness, anxiety, and depression, reduced self esteem, and a sense of 'life not worth living'. As depression and poor mental health are known markers of suicide risk, it may well be that one of the fundamental reasons for the observed association between divorce and suicide in men is the impact of post divorce (court sanctioned) 'arrangements'. Clearly this is an issue that needs further investigation."[16]

A Queensland study found that separated (compared with married) males were six times more likely to suicide, and this was greater in younger age groups. Males may be particularly vulnerable to suicide associated with interpersonal conflict in the separation phase.[17]

A media release issued by from Mensline Australia just prior to Christmas 2008 highlighted the issue of suicide for fathers separated from their children:

> *"As Christmas approaches, Mensline Australia has uncovered men living without their children are five times more likely to have attempted suicide, as compared to fathers who are living with their children.*

Highlighted in an analysis of the 60,000 callers who ring Mensline Australia each year, fathers living alone are also twice as likely to have experienced a serious mental health concern.

The extreme isolation and emotional pain many men feel is immediately apparent when they reach out for help and contact Mensline Australia. Fathers living alone are also three times more likely to be in the act of suicide when calling the professional telephone counselling service.

Dr Nick Foster of Mensline Australia explains many separated fathers are devastated by the inability to see or live with their children. "Men are awash with pain, anger and frustration when they call our counsellors. We receive at least two suicide-related calls every day. Sadly, we receive many more calls from men whose only glimmer of hope is the possibility of one day, being able to spend more time with their kids", said Dr Foster.

"The festive season really intensifies the difficulties faced of many non-custodial parents, with many dads highly frustrated and distressed that access to their kids is being controlled by someone else. This strips away a man's sense of worth, dignity and his identity as a father. The struggle to deal with these overwhelming feelings and separation from their kids, increases their risk of suicide", said Dr Foster.[18]

Suicide is not the only health risk increased by divorce. Cancer epidemiologists have reported that divorced men having significantly increased risk of a range of cancers including esophageal (2.49), anal (2.13), upper aerodigestive tract (1.69), lung (1.35), liver (1.27), and pancreas (1.20).[19]

In Australia most divorces are initiated by women: 64% according to women and 53% according to men.[20] The no-fault divorce regime introduced by the Family Law Act 1975 leaves men vulnerable to unilateral divorce in the absence of any fault. The fundamental injustice of this system has not been seriously reviewed since its introduction.

Comprehensive proposals for a fundamental reform of the Family Law Act 1975 have been made by Barry Maley in his book *Divorce Law and the Future of Marriage.*[21]

One of my proposals for reform is to require that the divorce must begin with a joint, consensual application, along with a statement that both agree to the divorce and terms of settlement (including questions of custody, if relevant).

Where there is no consensus, the partner wanting to separate could do so by simply leaving the marriage for a year and submitting a solo application.

On the face of it, leaving the marriage would constitute serious misconduct (desertion) unless the applicant could prove that he or she had been forced out of the marriage by the serious misconduct of the other spouse.

This would not mean reintroducing fault as a condition of divorce. The divorce would go ahead after a year's separation and a solo application. But a claim of serious misconduct by either or both spouses would have to be adjudicated, with the potential to compensate a victimised spouse through the divorce settlement.

Recognition of the reality of serious misconduct in many marriages, and dealing with the damage it does, is not only fair and proper, it must discourage it and contribute to better, more stable marriages.

A survey of almost 6000 adults earlier this year showed that three out of four agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition "that serious misconduct in a marriage should be able to affect the terms of a divorce settlement".

Requiring consensus where misconduct is not an issue is fairer and also likely to force spouses on the verge of divorce to fully confront the costs to each of them and to any children.

The present situation encourages precipitate, ill-considered separation and casualises divorce rather than treating it as the deeply serious issue it is.

Recommendation 4:

In the light of the adverse health consequences, especially elevated suicide rates, on divorced men a serious review of the no-fault, unilateral divorce provisions of the family Law Act 1975 should be undertaken as a matter of urgency.

6. National Men's Health Policy

In 2007, as part of its election commitments, the Commonwealth Government announced it would develop Australia's first National Men's Health Policy. This was followed up in June 2008 with the release by the Minister for Health and Ageing, the Hon Nicola Roxon MP, of the paper *Developing a Men's Health Policy for Australia – setting the scene*.

On 25 November 2008 the Minister for Health announced the appointment of men's health ambassadors:

The Australian Government wants Aussie men to start talking – to help it develop Australia's first ever National Men's Health Policy.

Whether young or old, single or married, in the city or the bush, the Government wants the views of Australian men to help make the policy strong, robust and effective.

A number of men's health ambassadors will be appointed to help engage the men of Australia in this important task.

I am pleased to announce the first of the ambassadors who have signed up. They are:

- *Professor David de Kretser AO, Governor of Victoria and founder and patron of Andrology Australia*
- *Mr Warwick Marsh, President of the Fatherhood Foundation*
- *Mr Tim Mathieson, Businessman and men's health advocate*
- *Mr Bill Noonan, Vice President of the Transport Workers Union Australia*
- *Mr Barry Williams, President of the Lone Fathers Association*
- *Professor John Macdonald, Foundation Chair in Primary Health Care and Co-Director Men's Health Information and Resource Centre, University of Western Sydney and President Australasian Men's Health Forum*[22]

The Government's stated desire to hear "the views of Australian men to help make the policy strong, robust and effective" was quickly demonstrated to be limited to hearing the views only of those men who passed a test of political correctness.

Men's health ambassador Mr Warwick Marsh, President of the Fatherhood Foundation, has a long record of generous service and involvement in the men's movement. He has convened several high

profile national summits at Parliament House – generally co-hosted on a bipartisan basis by members of parliament. Mr Marsh convened the National Strategic Summit on Marriage, Family and Fatherhood on Tuesday 18th September 2007. This summit was addressed by then Prime Minister John Howard and by Senator Joe Ludwig, Shadow Attorney General. A publication *21 Reasons Why Gender Matters* was launched at the Summit.[23] Copies were delivered to all members of parliament.

On 26 November 2008 Crikey journalist Bernard Keane launched an attack on Mr Marsh's appointment citing his role in the publication *21 Reasons Why Gender Matters* as disqualifying him for this task.

> *Marsh … seem[s] to have rather peculiar views on some male health issues. Worse than peculiar, actually. Downright evil is a term that springs to mind. Because [he appears] to have a problem with gay men.*
>
> [21 Reasons Why Gender Matters] *contains a long list of disgusting statements about homosexuality, suggesting it is unnatural, a "preventable and treatable" illness, representative of immaturity, and associated with psychiatric disorders and drug addiction. "Gender disorientation pathology", as the document calls homosexuality, "will lead to increased levels of drug abuse and partner violence." In particular, the document strongly associates homosexuality with sexual abuse. "Gender disorientation pathology encourages the sexual and psychological exploitation of children," it says.*

The Minister for Health did not waste any time in caving in to the demand for Mr Marsh's sacking.

> *The federal government has dismissed one of its new men's health ambassadors after he refused to repudiate gay-hate views.*
>
> *Warwick Marsh co-authored a paper which suggested gay men were more likely to be child molesters than heterosexuals.*
>
> *Health Minister Nicola Roxon says Mr Marsh has not repudiated 'extremely offensive' statements made in the paper.*
>
> *'This makes his position as an ambassador untenable and I have made a decision to dismiss him from this role,' she said in a statement.*
>
> *'I take full responsibility for this setback in the policy development and engagement process.'*[24]

The claims made in *21 Reasons Why Gender Matters* are all substantiated by extensive references.[25] In any case, the issue is not whether the views expressed in the publication, and endorsed by Mr Marsh, are all correct.

The issue is whether men who hold the view that homosexuality is unnatural and associated with various adverse outcomes, including adverse outcomes for men's mental and physical health, should be excluded from those "Aussie men" who are to be encouraged by the men's health ambassadors to "start talking" and from those men "whether young or old, single or married, in the city or the bush" whose views the Government wants to hear "to help make the policy strong, robust and effective."

A process of consultation is very selective when one particular view on men's health is ruled out of court before the consultation has even begun.

Ms Roxon's statement that she takes "full responsibility for this setback in the policy development and engagement process" was apparently meant as an apology to those who initiated and joined in the witch hunt against Mr Marsh. The Minister would do better to direct this apology to the larger body of "Aussie men" whom she has effectively disenfranchised by her peremptory and unjust sacking of a

man who has helped many men to find a voice to express their stories of injustice and despair and to find paths to healing and hope.

Recommendation 5:

The Select Committee should call on the Minister for Health to reinstate Mr Warwick Marsh as an ambassador for men's health with an unqualified apology to the men of Australia for the damage done to the consultation process on a national men's health policy by her unjust action.

7. Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

The application of Sections 61DA and 65DAA of the Family Law Act 1975 be reviewed in the light of the adverse health outcomes for boys who are deprived of significant and substantial contact with their fathers, to ensure that children whose parents separate or divorce have the opportunity to spend significant and substantial time with their fathers.

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8. Endnotes

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Disclosure: Three officers of FamilyVoice Australia are listed as "authors & contributors" to the publication.

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25. The 21 pages of text are supported by 178 footnotes.