

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON MEN'S HEALTH

Firstly I would like to thank the Committee for their concern and compassion in undertaking an inquiry into the long neglected issue of men's health.

Men's health needs vary according to the age and circumstances in their lives. The main health problems of men are well known, but their prevention and treatment have been starkly understood and under-funded in comparison to other groups in the community. Because of the short notice for submissions and time to prepare, I will limit my comments to two areas where I suspect government policy, and professional advice, contribute significantly to men's ill health and deaths. These areas are primary and secondary education of boys, and family law. Both are within the province of the federal government to act, and to quickly begin to make a difference.

BEING A MALE

Male and female are not only different physically, but they are hard-wired differently emotionally. Fortunately, and for the good of both, their physical and emotional differences are complementary, bringing out the best in each (1). Unfortunately, over a number of decades, public policy has developed a unisex or androgenous (2) view of male and female by trying to educate or coerce males into disconnecting their hard-wiring and behaving in a way that is more conducive to the hard-wiring of females. It has been well intentioned social engineering, but is mistaken policy which damages boys and men initially, and has a detrimental flow-on effect to women and children, and indeed the whole of society.

DYSFUNCTIONAL BOYS BECOME SICK MEN

Since the 1960s, educational philosophy and schools have become female driven. In part recognition of this there have been calls for more male teachers. The problem is that males have been deterred from pursuing or continuing careers in teaching because teacher education and behaviour management philosophy in schools have become unsuited to male hard-wiring, and they are shunning or are being forced out of the career of school teacher. It is a systemic problem that extends back to teacher education and modern philosophy of education. Male teachers can choose to opt out of schools. Unfortunately, boys in schools have no choice but to endure the system that creates dysfunction in them, and to suffer higher rates of mental illness, and to achieve less academic success than girls. For many boys, this is the launching pad for later behaviour problems and illnesses as men.

Education policies need to be reviewed so that the hard-wiring of both girls and boys can be celebrated and not, in the case of boys, stifled or confused. Co-education for all boys should be reviewed, and consideration given to some boys-only classes and/or schools. Academically, boys do better under single sex education (3). The behaviour management of boys should be changed with, for example, less negotiation, and the

authority and coercive powers of teachers and schools strengthened in a way that boys understand and respect.

FAMILY LAW

Anyone who has tried to help at a personal level men who have been unexpectedly evicted or prevented from entering their home, and/or suddenly deprived of normal contact with their children, or suddenly made homeless with just a small bag of possessions, sees at first hand the grievous emotional blow that they suffer, the damage to their physical health, and the long-term difficult recovery that they face. It is particularly traumatic for them when men are falsely charged with violence, and are the true victims of partner assault. It is as painful to witness as it is to witness and help a woman who has been subjected to domestic violence. The difference is that the woman can quickly find justice and support with a phone call, but men are left to fend for themselves and can face homelessness, isolation and a legal system that is biased against them. Like many women who have divorce or family breakdown forced upon them, there is a lingering bitterness about no-fault divorce that deeply damages the health of men, and women too. It is the injustice of the system that is forcing many men from broken families to travel down a road of dysfunction and even destruction.

OFFICE FOR THE STATUS OF MEN AND FATHERS

Unfortunately, there are cultural barriers in both the education and justice systems that need to be overcome in order to bring about the needed reforms and improve men's health. For this reason there is an urgent need for an office for the status of men and fathers that can bring an end to government oversight to the reform of the areas above, and other areas of government policy, in order to achieve better health for males of all ages, and consequently better health for women also.

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References

- (1) Steven Rhoads, *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*, San Francisco Encounter Books, 2004, p 4-5.
- (2) Bradford Wilcox, *Reconcilable Differences*, Touchstone, Nov 2005.
- (3) Kevin Donnelly, *Why Our Schools are Failing*, Duffy and Snellgrove, 2004, and Kevin Donnelly, *Dumbing Down*, Melbourne, Hardie Grant, 2007.