

Health of Young People

1998

Preamble

The AMA accepts that, as a group, those aged from 10 to 24 suffer distinct health problems and have distinct health needs. Young people face barriers to achieving good health and are exposed to behaviours which result in ill-health in later life. Habits such as smoking, excessive alcohol intake, drug abuse, inadequate diet, excessive sun exposure, unsafe sexual practices, lack of exercise and risk-taking behaviour often begin during teenage years. Breaking the cycle of these behaviours before they become entrenched will result in better health outcomes across the board.

Young people are at great risk from accidents and injury. Mortality data show that this age group is more likely than any other to die from external causes (accidents, poisonings and violence). Problems such as mental illness, low self-esteem, violence, self-harm, education/learning difficulties, stress, bullying and pregnancy have an immediate impact on the lives of young people, as well as on their future health and well-being.

A variety of diseases and disorders has particular importance in this age group. Eating disorders, some cancers, insulin-dependent diabetes, certain dental problems, asthma, attention deficit disorders, epilepsy and acne are significant problems for young people. Any strategy to treat or prevent such conditions must consider the distinctiveness of the disease and of the social and cultural environment and the particular needs of this age group.

Compared with the rest of the community, young people often experience difficulty in accessing health services. This results from many factors such as a lack of financial independence, lack of self-determination, inadequate access to transport, legal or regulatory age limits, domestic responsibilities, emotional immaturity, communication difficulties, lack of experience or information, cultural differences, generational changes, time and geographic location.

Some groups of young people suffer additional disadvantage to achieving good health and to accessing health care: such as Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders, those from a non-English speaking background, the homeless, young parents, the unemployed, those in rural and remote areas, young offenders, those living with a disability and young people marginalised because of their sexuality. Much more can be done to achieve and maintain the good health of all young people.

The AMA:

1. Supports the youth health policy statements articulated in the National Health Policy for Children and Young People (AHMAC 1995) and urges governments to implement the recommendations of that policy to advance the health of young people.
2. Recognises the key role of general practitioners in the delivery of health care to young people.
2. Believes that, where possible and developmentally appropriate, doctors should afford young people the same respect, rights and responsibilities as older patients. If a young person is able to make autonomous decisions regarding medical treatment, and wishes that treatment to remain confidential, then their doctor must respect and maintain that confidentiality.
4. Calls on the Federal Government to make Medicare cards available to all Australians, regardless of age. The current approach does not take account of changing family situations and parenting arrangements.
5. Calls on medical schools and the medical Colleges to recognise, as a priority, the importance of providing high quality education in youth health.

6. Recognises the fundamental importance of self-esteem in the health of young people and supports projects and pursuits which foster self-esteem.
7. Believes that for young people to achieve equity in health and welfare outcomes, a national office should be established to promote their interests and to stimulate best practice and research in youth health.

Definitions

The AMA supports the World Health Organisation (WHO) definition of health care as it relates to young people: "a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not simply the absence of disease or infirmity".

The WHO defines young people as those aged from 10 to 24. This broad age range encapsulates several different life stages, health needs and health risks. The AMA believes that this period can generally be described as one of transition and that enough commonality exists amongst individuals in this age-group for it to be useful as a category in the planning of health care.

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