



## **Submission of Family Planning NSW**

### **Adult literacy and its importance**

March 2021

Family Planning NSW welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training regarding the inquiry into 'Adult literacy and its importance'.

We have a strong history of consulting with the Parliament of Australia and encourage the Committee to ensure that all people have the opportunity to obtain high levels of literacy, specifically health literacy, to promote lifelong health and wellbeing.

### **About Family Planning NSW**

Family Planning NSW is the leading provider of reproductive and sexual health services in NSW and Australia. Our mission is to enhance the reproductive and sexual health and rights of our communities by supporting all people to have control over and decide freely on all matters related to their reproductive and sexual health. We have been operating for over 90 years, working with communities across NSW, including in regional, rural and remote areas.

Family Planning NSW has significant experience in the provision of reproductive and sexual health information and services. We provide over 31,000 clinical occasions of service to clients annually, information and health promotion activities to communities, and best practice education and training in reproductive and sexual health for doctors, nurses, teachers, disability support workers and other health, education and welfare professionals.

Our services are targeted to marginalised and disadvantaged members of the community, including people from culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, refugees, people with disability, young people, and people from rural and remote areas.

A key focus area for our organisation is supporting all people to make informed decisions about their health through the development of health literacy. Our clinical services, education and health promotion activities foster health literacy development and are tailored to the needs of the community, including those with low literacy levels.

### **Recommendations**

Family Planning NSW recommends:

1. explore the provision of accessible comprehensive sexuality education as a key strategy to improve healthy literacy levels among adults and young people
2. invest in health literacy programs, resources and information that are accessible and meet the needs of vulnerable and marginalised populations
3. consistent implementation of a national comprehensive sexuality education framework is needed to ensure the health literacy needs of individuals are met
4. include timely, holistic and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education in the Australian school curriculum to promote development of students' health literacy
5. provide access to professional development and evidence-based resources to teachers and educators to facilitate comprehensive sexuality education to develop health literacy

## Key points

Family Planning NSW believes that everybody in every family should have access to high-quality reproductive and sexual health services, education and information that meets the needs of individuals and communities.

We strongly affirm the need for consistent provision of comprehensive sexuality education (a primary strategy to develop and advance health literacy levels) to people of all ages to ensure they are able to achieve optimal levels of reproductive and sexual health and wellbeing.

Our key points, in relation to the inquiry *Terms of Reference*, are outlined below:

### **1. The relationship between adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills and socio-demographic characteristics, particularly migrant status, First Nations status and individuals living in households that have experienced intergenerational unemployment**

Strong evidence suggests that people who are vulnerable and marginalised, including young people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and people with intellectual disability, have lower literacy and numeracy skills than the wider population.(1, 2) This, in turn, has significant implications on the level of health, including reproductive and sexual health, which these groups experience.(1, 3, 4)

The reproductive and sexual health of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is poor in comparison to the wider Australian population.(5) This is also the case for other vulnerable and marginalised population groups, including those who are financially and/or geographically disadvantaged.(5) Often, these health disparities are linked to issues of education, health service availability and accessibility, culturally appropriate practice and the ability to understand and use health information.

People who are vulnerable and marginalised face increased barriers to accessing education, which, in turn, results in lower levels of literacy, including health literacy.(1, 6) Health literacy refers to a set of skills that shape an individual's ability to gain access to, understand and use health information and services in ways that promote and maintain health and wellbeing, thereby enabling people to function effectively in health systems.(7, 8)

Implementation of health literacy programs, including the delivery of evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education to people of all ages, is a key strategy to address poor health outcomes and improve health literacy levels among adults. When delivered as an early intervention strategy, comprehensive sexuality education supports all people to make informed and healthy choices regarding their reproductive and sexual health.(9)

Health information and education, including comprehensive sexuality education, should be provided in a culturally appropriate and accessible manner that meets the needs of all people. This may increase access to and uptake of health services and improve overall levels of population health and wellbeing.

**Recommendation:** Explore the provision of accessible comprehensive sexuality education as a key strategy to improve healthy literacy levels among adults and young people.

## **2. The effect that literacy and numeracy skills have on an individual's labour force participation and wages**

Education is key to improving opportunities for all Australians.(2) An individual's level of education directly influences their experience of health and wellbeing as well as their ability to engage in sustainable and meaningful employment.(1, 6)

Higher levels of education empowers individuals to have the knowledge and skills needed to increase their socioeconomic position and economic independence through higher skilled jobs and income.(1) More directly, higher levels of education and subsequently higher levels of health literacy assists individuals in understanding and implementing health messages, resulting in better health outcomes.(10)

Economic independence is an enabler – for both women and men – to exercise control over their lives and make informed choices. At an individual level, the benefits of increasing literacy and numeracy levels include increased workforce participation rates, additional financial security, increased savings for retirement and the tools required to contribute to a prosperous and sustained society.(2)

Comprehensive sexuality education is a crucial strategy that supports the development of health literacy among people of all ages and promotes economic independence, particularly that of women and girls.(9) Comprehensive sexuality education includes the provision of information on: puberty; respectful relationships; sexual health and sexual behaviour; health literacy and decision making; contraception, pregnancy and pregnancy options. This information allows women and their families to choose whether and when to have children, and reduces rates of unplanned pregnancy and its effects on the labour force.

Comprehensive sexuality education, along with higher education attainment, enables all people to meaningfully participate in society and to develop skills that enable them to make informed and healthy decisions.(9) In turn, this leads to physical, social and economic benefits for individuals, their families and communities.

Consistent implementation of comprehensive sexuality education is needed within Australia to ensure all people develop optimal levels of literacy, including health literacy, which fosters development of essential life skills and opportunities for employment.

## **3. Links between literacy and social outcomes such as health, poverty, ability to care for other family members and participation in civic life**

There are strong links between health literacy levels and social outcomes, including reproductive and sexual health outcomes, particularly among vulnerable and marginalised communities.(4) These include increased rates of hospitalisation and emergency department use, poorer overall health status when compared to the wider population, avoidance of cervical cancer screening and higher rates of unplanned pregnancy.(4)

Women with intellectual disability, a group commonly identified as having low literacy levels, are often under screened for cancers of the reproductive tract, sexually transmissible infections and other reproductive and sexual health issues.(11, 12) Under-screening is often due to limited knowledge and understanding about the importance of reproductive and sexual health and preventive screening, a direct result of poor health literacy levels, as well as other physical and structural barriers.(12)

Health information must be accessible to all people and take health literacy levels into consideration during resource planning and development. Examples of accessible health information include resources that are written in Plain English for people with low literacy and numeracy levels as well as resources developed using Easy English principles for people with intellectual disability.

Given the demonstrable links between low health literacy and poor health outcomes, consideration must be given to strategies that improve the health literacy levels of all people, especially children and young people who are then able to carry these skills throughout life.

**Recommendation:** Invest in health literacy programs, resources and information that are accessible and meet the needs of vulnerable and marginalised populations.

### Just Checking project

Family Planning NSW works to ensure all people have access to high quality reproductive and sexual health information, education and services. A recent example of how Family Planning NSW works to improve the health literacy of people with disability is the [Just Checking](#) project.

The *Just Checking* project, funded by the Cancer Institute NSW aimed to increase the uptake of cancer screening by addressing the underlying barriers that prevent people with disability from accessing services at levels equal to others. This was done by improving the health literacy of people with disability through the development of accessible health education and information resources and educating disability service providers and health care workers on how to support clients with low health literacy levels.

This multi-faceted project incorporated a range of activities including the development of *Just Checking* resources:

- Easy-English social story resources to increase awareness and knowledge of cervical, breast and bowel cancer screening for people with disability
- a tool to help disability support workers, parents and carers support people with intellectual disability to access screening services
- an update of the Family Planning NSW *Supporting Decision Making Tool* to assist clinicians to support people with intellectual disability within the clinical setting

The project also involved the development and delivery of face-to-face and online training for:

- disability support workers in how to support people with intellectual disability to access cancer screening
- clinicians in how to support women with disability to access cervical screening

Key results from this two-year project include:

- 735 clinicians trained, with 83% of survey respondents reporting that they were confident in discussing cervical screening for women with an intellectual disability
- 1,505 community members, including disability support workers and parents and carers, were engaged in conversations about cancer screening
- resource distribution of 6,304 social stories, 4,246 support person's tools and 14,654 video views

Evaluation results were favourable in reducing low uptake of cervical, breast and bowel screening and improving the reproductive and sexual health literacy levels of people with disability.

#### 4. The availability, impact and effectiveness of adult literacy and numeracy education programs in Australia and internationally

It is crucial that all people receive high-quality and evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education as a means to improve health literacy. Currently, comprehensive sexuality education is not provided consistently within Australian schools and very little is provided within community settings.

Consideration must be given to the provision of comprehensive sexuality education as a way to address low health literacy levels. Without access to essential comprehensive sexuality education many individuals will not have the opportunity to develop their health literacy skills and adverse health outcomes will increase. Consequences of this are well documented and include increasing levels of poverty, higher rates of physical and mental ill-health, poorer levels of education and higher rates of domestic and family violence.

One strategy to ensure consistent delivery is through integrating comprehensive sexuality education into the *Australian Curriculum* as well as wider community programs. The *Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education* is shaped by five interrelated propositions, one of which includes 'development of health literacy'.<sup>(7)</sup> This presents an opportunity to embed comprehensive sexuality education within Australian curricula, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to access this essential education.

As a lifelong process, comprehensive sexuality education must begin during early school stages and be age and stage appropriate. This enables students to build on and develop health literacy from a young age and use these skills in later life. Further, teachers and other education providers should be supported to deliver evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education as a means to improve health literacy levels.

**Recommendation:** Consistent implementation of a national comprehensive sexuality education framework is needed to ensure the health literacy needs of individuals are met.

**Recommendation:** Include timely, holistic and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education in the Australian school curriculum to promote development of health literacy.

**Recommendation:** Provide access to professional development and evidence-based resources to teachers and educators to facilitate comprehensive sexuality education to develop health literacy.

#### Conclusion

Health literacy empowers individuals with the information and skills needed to achieve optimal health and wellbeing. There are many known links between low health literacy levels and poor health outcomes. As such, health education, information and resources should be developed and produced in ways that are appropriate and accessible to all people, including those with lower literacy and numeracy skills. We encourage the Committee to explore opportunities for investment in accessible health information and education, including the provision of comprehensive sexuality education, as strategies to improve health literacy levels of adults, especially those who are vulnerable and marginalised.

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