

Women's Health Policy Alliance Workshop

30 November 2020

Chronic conditions and preventive health

Introduction

Jean Hailes for Women's Health, together with the Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association (AHHA), co-hosted the Chronic Conditions and Preventive Health policy workshop on Monday 30 November 2020. The workshop aimed to identify implementation priorities for the *National Women's Health Strategy 2020 – 2030* with particular consideration to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and their health risks and needs.

Janet Michelmore AO, interim CEO of Jean Hailes for Women's Health and Alison Verhoeven, Chief Executive of AHHA opened the workshop. In her opening remarks, Alison Verhoeven highlighted the prevalence of chronic conditions among women. The most recently available [data](#) from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows that:

- 50% of all women have at least one of the top 10 most common chronic conditions
- 4 in 5 women over the age of 65 have at least one chronic condition
- 2 in 5 women under the age of 45 have one chronic condition
- musculoskeletal conditions account for ~40% of the chronic disease experienced by women
- mental health and behavioural conditions account for a further 20% of the chronic disease burden in women.

Ms Verhoeven also pointed to research published by AHHA that demonstrates that, if actions were taken to close the health gap between the most and least disadvantaged people in Australia, there would be half a million fewer people experiencing chronic illness. That would translate to 170,000 more people working, \$8 billion in extra earnings in the economy, \$4 billion savings on welfare payments, 60,000 fewer hospitalisations each year and health budget savings of about \$3 billion per year.

The workshop identified priority areas for action, including recommendations for the sector and for government. This summary highlights the issues and implementation priorities raised:

- during the workshop, both verbally and using the Zoom chat function
- via a post-workshop survey, circulated to workshop invitees including those unable to attend on the day.

Priority actions in light of COVID-19

Investment in and better utilisation of data to inform the tailoring of health services to the needs of women and girls

There is an abundance of available data that is not used effectively to inform and tailor health services and planning service provision. An audit of available data should be undertaken to identify what data could be used and how it could be used, and to identify gaps in data collection, that are relevant to monitoring women's health and planning and tailoring service provision, to inform investment in further development of appropriately disaggregated, nationally consistent data.

Invest in targeted prevention and early detection for at-risk groups for chronic disease

Invest in targeted prevention and early detection for groups at increased risk of developing chronic disease, including:

- postmenopausal women and particularly women who experience early, premature or surgical menopause, and women who may be at risk of experiencing early or premature menopause, eg, women who are diagnosed with endometriosis
- women diagnosed with polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS)
- women who experience conditions such as hypertension, preeclampsia and gestational diabetes during pregnancy
- women from priority populations.

Awareness campaigns should be targeted at both health professionals and the community and should be responsive to the diverse characteristics, needs, and health literacy levels of women in Australia, including women with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and refugee backgrounds, LGBTIQ+ communities, women from low-SES backgrounds and women living in rural and remote areas. VicHealth's [This Girl Can](#) campaign was identified as a good practice example of responding to all women in their diversity.

Raise awareness among girls at the onset of puberty regarding the symptoms of endometriosis

Provide targeted education to young women and girls (integrated with school curricula) regarding 'normal' experiences of menstruation, and symptoms that require follow up with a healthcare professional. This could help to counter the ongoing delay to diagnosis for this condition.

- Pelvic Pain Foundation of Australia's [PPEP Talks](#) program was highlighted as a good practice example

Recognise the impact of rural and remote living on access to diagnosis and treatment for endometriosis

A knowledge gap among rural and remote healthcare professionals regarding endometriosis was identified. Addressing this knowledge gap through targeted awareness campaigns would improve access to diagnosis and treatment for women in rural and remote areas living with this condition.

Address chronic disease risk factors including poverty, homelessness and intimate partner violence

Good health is not simply a product of good health policy and services. There are significant health disparities and risks arising from social determinants of health. The impact of poverty, housing insecurity and intimate partner violence on women's health needs to be recognised, including investment in targeted strategies to address these issues. A permanent increase to the rate of Jobseeker payments is an urgent need to support disadvantaged women and their health.

Invest in the development of tailored digital health information

In light of COVID-19, more women are willing to engage with digital health resources, including telehealth and digital health apps, to monitor their health. This provides the opportunity to invest in targeted digital health information, tailored to the specific symptoms and risk factors for women, with particular regard to disadvantaged women and older women.

Maintain access to telehealth

Gains in telehealth access, including bulk-billed telehealth GP consultations, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, need to be preserved. Telehealth is considered to be critical for women living with chronic conditions, particularly those in rural and remote areas, to provide access to specialists.

Commission the development of guidelines to support the tailoring of health services

An appropriate agency should be funded to research and develop a toolkit or guidelines to support health administrators and clinicians to tailor health services to the needs of women and girls. Such guidelines would need to include

- identification of data set/s which enable services to understand needs of women in the local area
- guidelines for tailoring a service or program in response to identified needs
- processes for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions.

Form a consortium of organisations to progress identified priority areas

Forming a consortium of interested organisations to progress the priority areas identified through the workshop process was proposed.