

POLICY DOCUMENT

MARRIAGE EQUALITY AND HEALTH

Background

The Australian Medical Students' Association ("AMSA") is the peak representative body of Australia's medical students. AMSA believes that all communities have the right to the best attainable health. Accordingly, AMSA advocates on issues that may impact health outcomes.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex ("LGBTI") persons comprise a minority population that suffers poorer health than the heterosexual population. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people are 2.47 times more likely to attempt suicide (4.28 times for gay and bisexual men) and are 1.5 times more likely to suffer depression, anxiety disorders and alcohol and other substance dependence.[1]

Much of this health disadvantage may be attributed to the phenomenon known as 'minority stress', which LGBTI persons experience in their struggle for validation and societal acceptance.[2] Stigma and discrimination against sexual minorities has been extensively documented [3] and assessed as likely to be at least part of the reason for the higher rates of psychological morbidity observed.[1, 4]

The youth sub-group is particularly vulnerable, experiencing more frequent and more serious suicide attempts than their heterosexual counterparts. Heterosexism may also lead to isolation, family rejection, and lack of access to culturally competent care.[5]

Discriminatory policies relative specifically to marriage equality (where marriage equality is defined as achievement of policy point 1a below) have been shown to have negative health effects, with significant increases in psychiatric disorders amongst lesbian, gay and bisexual persons living in states that banned gay marriage.[6] In Australia, the Marriage Act 1961 (Cth) currently defines marriage as a legal union solely between a man and a woman, which discriminates institutionally on the basis of sexual orientation. Marriage denial reinforces stigma associated with sexual identity and undermines well-being for all LGBTI persons, with adolescents and young adults again particularly sensitive. Conversely, marriage equality would confer broadened developmental options for lesbian and gay adolescents and young adults, who could then envision marriage as a key element of their adulthood.[7]

In 2002, the Australian Medical Association Limited (AMA) adopted a comprehensive position statement, 'Sexual Diversity and Gender Identity'. AMSA draws attention to clause 6.6:

The AMA is supportive of legislation that proscribes discrimination and provides legislative recognition of same-sex unions and families as this will lead to legal, societal, financial and healthcare equity within the community.[8]

Many other health associations also support marriage equality on health grounds, or have recognised the major health care disparities that exist as a result of denying marriage equality, including the American Medical Association [9], Indiana State Medical Association [2], Gay and Lesbian Medical Association [10], Australian Lesbian Medical Association, American Psychiatric Association [12], American Academy of Pediatrics [13], American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists [14], American Psychological Association [15] and Australian Psychological Society [16].

Position statement

AMSA believes that:

1. Embracing diversity and countering unjustifiable discrimination against LGBTI persons is a necessary and important step towards health equality for all members of society;
2. There are no health arguments in favour of defining marriage as a legal union solely between a man and a woman; and
3. Marriage equality would reduce the discrimination and thus minority stress that LGBTI persons suffer, leading to improved health.

Policy

AMSA calls upon:

1. The Australian Government to:
 - 1.1. remove all discriminatory references from the Marriage Act 1961 to allow all people, regardless of sex, sexuality and gender identity, the opportunity to marry;
 - 1.2. develop and implement goals, policies and strategies to minimise the health

- inequities experienced by LGBTI persons; and
- 1.3. support research into the negative health effects of stigma and discrimination on LGBTI persons.
2. The AMSA Executive to:
- 2.1 Publicly support marriage equality individually and/or in collaboration with other organisations and initiatives;
 - 2.2 Where appropriate, lobby State and non-State actors in pursuit of the recommendations at policy points 1a-c above; and
 - 2.3 Encourage and support educational and service activities pertaining to LGBTI health issues by medical schools, AMSA ThinkTanks, medical students' societies and individual medical students.

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