Addressing health inequities for same sex attracted women in New South Wales, Australia, who use drugs.

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Introduction

ACON’s Alcohol and Other Drugs Program provides a Needle Syringe Program, peer-based harm reduction programs, drug education targeted at young people, and a Gawler Community and Transgender (GLBT) community, and counselling services. The Lesbian Health Project works with lesbians and other same sex attracted (SSA) women to improve their health and wellbeing through health promotion, peer education and community development programs as well as providing capacity development for mainstream service providers.

In Australia the GLBT community has markedly higher rates of drug use than the general population. Efforts to address health inequalities in particular are hampered by lack of research, poor understanding of the issues by potential funding bodies, and the lack of a single defining health issue (such as HIV among gay men) around which to focus advocacy efforts. Equally problematic is the absence of consideration given to lesbians and SSA women in the vast majority of Australian national and state health policies.

The issues

- The Sydney Women and Sexual Health (SWASH) survey is a bi-annual community survey of around 1000 women engaged with the GLBT community in Sydney. Unpublished data from the 2010 SWASH survey indicates much higher rates of binge drinking and ecstasy usage compared with non-heterosexual women than among women in the 2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (see Table 1).

- The disparity between heterosexual and SSA women’s drug use is reflected internationally. A meta-analysis of 18 studies of sexual orientation and drug use found the odds of substance use for young SSA women was 4 times higher than that of heterosexual young women.

- A recent international review indicates that lesbians who use drugs experience barriers to health services in relation to both their gender and sexuality in ways that are uniquely determined.

- Previous studies provide mixed results on rates of health service access by same sex attracted and transgender people. A recent study of non-using young women found, however, that women from minority sexualities were less likely to report having a regular GP and were more likely to report dissatisfaction with their health care providers.

- Lesbians and other SSA women may experience discrimination as a barrier to accessing healthcare. Such discrimination may be actual, or perceived; direct, or indirect; or systemic.

- In addition to elevated rates of drug and alcohol use, SSA women in Australia have lower than optimal cervical screening, presentation for mental health services, and STI testing rates, as well as higher reported rates of dissatisfaction with their health care service providers. Despite these differences, the Australasian Health System treats lesbian health as synonymous with women’s health.

Table 1: Rates of recent drug use by non-heterosexual women in the 2010 SWASH Survey compared with women in the 2010 Household Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Women in Household Survey</th>
<th>Women in SWASH Survey</th>
<th>Recent Drug Use (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In response to the consistently low uptake of both harm reduction and treatment services by SSA women, ACON has successfully advocated with a major funder of our drug and alcohol work to allocate some existing funding to produce SSA-specific drug resources, in the interests of equity.

A Web-based campaign called Word Of Mouth, which will be released in early December, seeks to engage with networks of SSA women who use drugs but may not access ACON services. This campaign was interactive and informative, featuring posts on social media and ACON’s YouTube channel. This approach may be compelling and appealing to people who do not relate discussions about drug use to health.

Recent work

ACON has addressed these issues through the development of its Lesbian Health Strategy 2008-2011, the first of its kind in Australia. This document brings together key research on the health status and needs of SSA women, and underscores the need for capacity building around provision of appropriate services to this group. The Strategy focuses on the need to build programs which inform, educate and assist the health system and women to address the real issues of health problems such as social inclusion.

To date, the Lesbian Health Project has delivered a range of successful outcomes and service provision to lesbians and SSA women. It has received support and assistance from ACON in many areas of ACON. Challenges remain with regard to how best to position lesbian health to secure new and sustainable funding.

In the absence of adequate resourcing, the Lesbian Health Strategy and ACON GILBT Health agenda have been instrumental in supporting organisational efforts to re-direct existing funding to create resources that meet the needs of lesbians who use drugs.

Framing a response with limited resources

In Australia the GLBT community has markedly higher rates of drug use than the general population. Efforts to address health inequalities in particular are hampered by lack of research, poor understanding of the issues by potential funding bodies, and the lack of a single defining health issue (such as HIV among gay men) around which to focus advocacy efforts. Equally problematic is the absence of consideration given to lesbians and SSA women in the vast majority of Australian national and state health policies.

Next steps

ACON continues to advocate for recognition and prioritisation of lesbians and other SSA women’s health issues in general policy. Recognising that sexual orientation is a social determinant of health that impacts on individual and population health outcomes, ACON continues to advocate for the inclusion of a sexuality question in all health related research, to improve the evidence base for the health status and needs of SSA women.

The Lesbian Health Project provides sexual diversity training for mainstream health care providers, with a focus on competency in service delivery for SSA women. This is delivered through conference presentations, resource reviews, partnership work and training days.

The Alcohol and Other Drugs Program actively recruits SSA women to become involved in ACON's peer-based harm reduction programs such as the Needle Syringe Program Peer Education Project to create a more welcoming environment for SSA clients.