



Young People's Rights Granted & Taken Away

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In just one day, we have seen the Howard Government extend their protection of children and young people through the Convention on the Rights of the Child while simultaneously planning to remove the right to health care access.

Less than one day after the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission applauded the Australia Government for ratifying two Optional Protocols on the Convention on the Rights of the Child to protect young people from involvement in armed conflict and from sexual exploitation, the Australia Medical Association (AMA) has highlighted the Howard Government's attempt to stifle young people's basic access to medical services. The AMA's submission into the Access Card consultation suggested that the legislation was 'full of holes' and that the impact on young people would be 'completely unnecessary and highly adverse'.

The attempt by the government to use the Access Card legislation as a means to remove young people's right to have their own Medicare Card as a matter of course constructs yet another barrier that will prevent many young people from accessing vital health services – particularly sexual health, mental health and alcohol and other drug services which rely on Medicare Cards.

We have spent the last decade promoting and destigmatising these health services for young people but in one move the Howard Government will have undone so much of this work by not allowing young people to access these services confidentially.

We know that young people need to use mental health services and sexual health services and they often do not want their parents to know about it for one reason or another. As a community, we have accepted this in Australia and for that purpose have allowed 16-18 year olds to have their own Medicare Card.

Yet for no apparent reason, the Howard Government has determined that this should no longer be the case – without the direct approval of the Minister or the Secretary of the Department of Human Services young people would not be able to get their own Access Card.

These bureaucratic restrictions are foolish and arbitrary. Anyone who has worked with young people knows how important confidentiality and privacy is for them. We also know that without the ability to access health care services individually, many young people will simply not to access health services at all.

The issue of access to basic health care for all 16-18 year olds is just one of the issues this arbitrary decision will impact on.

What about the importance of the Medicare Card as a proof of identity for young people who are less likely to have a drivers' licence or passport than the rest of the population?

What about young people who live away from home?

What about the impact of increased bureaucratic paperwork and red tape for all young people who received concession cards from Centrelink when they are students?

Reducing young people's access to health care services is not only poor policy but directly contravenes the Convention on the Rights of the Child to which Australia is a signatory. The Convention specifically states under Article 24 of the Convention that government must "ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to health care services".

At the same time as the Australian Government increases its commitment to this Convention by signing two optional protocols, it is proposing changes that directly contravene other sections of this Convention.

It is clear that one of two things has occurred when this legislation has been drafted. Either the government has put it together in such a rushed and on the run manner that they haven't considered the impact this will have on young people, or secondly, that young people are not important.

Given that this government has de-funded the national peak body for youth affairs (AYPAC) leaving young people and youth services without a voice at a national level. It downgraded the Minister for Youth Affairs to a Parliamentary Secretary and then abolished that, leaving young people with no representation in the Cabinet. The Howard Government then amended legislation to restrict young people's ability to sign onto the electoral roll after the election is called. Reducing the previous seven day window to just a few hours.

Then it halved the size of the only consultation mechanism they have with young people by reducing the National Youth Roundtable from 50 to just 25 new members each year. Finally in November 2006, the Howard Government abolished the National Indigenous Youth Leadership Group and amalgamated this with the Roundtable so that the significant issues faced by Indigenous youth will no longer be considered in a purely Indigenous forum and are likely to be hidden amongst the plethora of issues in the Roundtable.

From this brief (and certainly not exhaustive) list of the moves this government has taken to marginalise, downgrade and disempower young people, is difficult to suggest this change is for any other reason than this government has abandoned any commitment it ever had to young people in this country.

The Howard Government needs to retract these changes and reduce the minimum age for Access Cards to 16 years of age to bring it in line with the current arrangements for Medicare cards. Failing to do so will deter thousands of young people around the country from accessing basic health care services and will seriously undermine our commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.