

The Youth Coalition recognises that sexual health is one aspect of young people's overall health and thus, inadequate sexual health information can result in young people exposed to increased risks of infection and poor health. Research suggests that young people have low levels of knowledge in regards to many areas of sexual health and that it is the responsibility of both the government and community to address this through increased quality education in schools and the youth sector.

As the median age of sexual intercourse is currently around 16 years of age with over quarter of Year 10 students having had sexual intercourse and just under half of Year 12 students,<sup>1</sup> it is vital that young people are informed about sexual health and safe sexual behaviours. The Youth Coalition is concerned at research indicating that only 40% of year 12 students regularly use condoms when having sexual intercourse.<sup>2</sup> Given that research also suggests that 33% of males in years 10-12 have had 3 or more sexual partners in the past year, the risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) transmission is dramatically increased when combined with relatively low levels of protected sexual activity.<sup>3</sup>

The Youth Coalition is also concerned that over 28% of young women and 23% of young men have experienced unwanted sex, often resulting from pressure from a sexual partner or intoxication.<sup>4</sup> The Youth Coalition believes that all young people should be empowered in their relationships with others and are free and competent to make choices that they are comfortable with. As there are such high rates of unwanted sex, the Youth Coalition is concerned that some young people do not always have the ability to stop unwanted sex and advocates for sexual education in schools to involve choice making and empowerment in relationships.

Sexual health education is important for young people in order to ensure that they have sexual behaviour which limits their risk of both unwanted pregnancy and contracting STI's. While many young people are aware of HIV, they generally have limited knowledge about other STIs that are preventable— particularly Chlamydia. Young people's low levels of knowledge on sexual health issues and increasingly younger age of sexual activity is likely to have contributed to the more than tripling of the number of young people detected with Chlamydia from 1991 to 2001.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Smith et al. (2003) *Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2002* Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University p2

<sup>2</sup> Ibid p33

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p2

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p47

<sup>5</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2003), *Australia's Young People: Their Health and Wellbeing* p124

Given low levels of knowledge about sexual health – including STIs – education for young people needs to be seen to be relevant, trustworthy and engaging in order to reduce risk factors surrounding sexual health issues. Research also suggests that males generally have less knowledge about sexual health and are less likely to access sexual health services than women.<sup>6</sup> The Youth Coalition therefore recognises the need for programs to be culturally specific and gender specific in order to ensure that young people are exposed to appropriate and relevant material.

The Youth Coalition therefore believes that families, schools and youth sector have an important role to play in the sexual health education for young people. The Youth Coalition recognises the valuable role that the youth sector continues to play in sexual health service provision for young people through the supply of contraception, education and sexual health services. The provision of sexual health services which are youth friendly and appropriate for young people to access – through reduced stigma and relevant information and promotional materials – have largely been the work of the youth sector working in partnership with government. The Youth Coalition recognises the importance of youth sector and government partnerships in achieving positive outcomes for young people and their access of sexual health services and information.

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### **The Youth Coalition is committed to:**

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- ◆ Advocating for the provision of high quality, evidence based information for young people on sexual health to be included in all high school and college curriculum.
- ◆ Advocating for the provision of youth specific sexual health services for young people that are accessible and affordable.
- ◆ Advocating for services to deliver unbiased advice to young people.
- ◆ Advocating for the provision of sexual health services which are targeted at young people who have generally low levels of knowledge about sexual health or low levels of contact with sexual health services, particularly young men and homeless young people.

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Smith, *Op Cit* p20