

Emma Heard- November 2022

Thanks to the Suzanne Gleeson Professional Development grant, I had the opportunity to attend the Australian Association of Adolescent Health, Youth Health Conference in Naam (Melbourne). Overall, the conference drove home how strong, wise, and resilient our young people are. Young people around the country know what they need and what needs to happen for a more equitable and sustainable world – our job is listen (really listen, not just hear) and take action with and beside our young people.



Angelica Ojinnaka, Australia's Youth Representative to the United Nations opened the conference with a reminder of how far we have to go in order to achieve the Sustainability Development Goals and highlighting that we must be working beside young people in our efforts to reach these. Consistent with the conference theme, *Recovery, Resilience, Rights*, a key message from Angelica Okinnaka's powerful presentation was that you can't talk about

youth needs or youth rights without youth. This message was echoed by young people across the three days. From this opening plenary presentation, we learnt that young people across Australia are calling for systemic change related to climate change, First Nations rights and reconciliation, and accessible mental, physical and reproductive health care. Importantly, we were challenged to reach beyond youth-friendly practice to youth-affirming practice. We then heard from Seth Westhead, Daniel Rosendale, and Kate Thompson about a new national project working with young people across Australia to develop [a roadmap to guide actions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescent health](#). This presentation brought issues of systemic and ongoing racism to the fore and introduced two core themes that were reiterated over the following days: the importance of critical self-reflection and meaningful sharing of power with young people.

With my background including sexual health promotion and sexual violence prevention, I was interested to the afternoon session focused on Sexual & Reproductive Health and Relationships and Sexuality Education. We heard about a two sexual health educational programs, one with young women in juvenile detention and the other an online supported learning resource for young people with a disability. These were very different programs but both demonstrated the importance of working with young people in the design process, allowing participants to guide the direction and focus of each session or module. We learnt from a scoping study that in Australia we need to strengthen approaches and resources for teaching and learning about consent – particularly pertinent given consent education will be enshrined in the curriculum for all schools from next year. Novel and promising approaches include using the arts, elevating the student voice, and peer or near-to-peer models. Georgia Carr from The University of Sydney presented a new framework for consent education built from an in-depth, qualitative study that included observation of more than 30 hours of

consent lessons in schools. This work presented important insights around the fact that pleasure or ‘quality’ is generally missing from consent education and that ultimately for sex to be consensual ‘everyone has to feel good and behave well’. This session also included interesting insights about the ongoing ‘othering’ of diverse cultural experiences in sex and reproductive health education; a good reminder that sexual education in Australia is not culturally diverse enough. Finally, we learnt that relatively few young people use reusable period products and that reducing costs and providing suitable places for changing would support their uptake.

For people interested in vaping cessation, [resources and guidelines](#) based models used for smoking cessation (the 5A’s and Stages of Change) were presented during a helpful professional development workshop.

A huge first day ended with a focus on COVID-19 recovery. We heard from a panel including Dr Sandro Demaio (CEO of VicHealth, Dr Megan Lim (Burnet Institute), Dr Bianca Forrester (Regional GP), and Ella Cehun (Centre for Adolescent Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, The Royal Children’s Hospital). The session brought to the fore some key learnings: the importance of addressing the social determinants of health (what have we health promotion practitioners been taking about for the last two decades?!); the need for schools to be ‘health and wellbeing promoting’; and the importance of engaging young people in things that are meaningful to them and things that they value. Ultimately, life won’t be the same as we learn to live with COVID-19, but the exhaustion that has followed the height of the pandemic will ease, and we should take this moment to create and enact a vision of a hopeful future.



The second day of the conference was opened by three young people with stories of empowerment and change making. We heard [from Daniel and William Clarke](#) who have made significant contributions to saving the orangutans of Borneo (also supporting climate change efforts). Jean Hinchliffe then gave an articulate and powerful presentation about the beginnings and future for [School Strike 4 Climate](#). This plenary demonstrated the power and strength of young people across Australia and their ability to challenge the status quo and take action on systemic issues facing our country and our Earth.

An interactive symposium delivered by VicHealth introduced us to a new [framework for evaluating youth engagement](#), which again drilled home the importance of working with young people in ways that are meaningful and consistent. Youth engagement must recognise

and renumerate young people for their contributions and must include a feedback process.

The day was rounded out with a session exploring diverse sub-populations from a range of perspectives and in a range of contexts. Karen Molhuysen from [Sexual Health Quarters](#) presented new sexual health resources designed with and for young people in their communities, that reflected their diverse bodies. And demonstrated best-practice co-design processes by describing the development and implementation of a sexual health education program with women from refugee and migrant communities (check out the HERS program!).

The third and final day of the conference was kicked off by a discussion between National Children's Commissioner Anne Hollonds and a panel of young people. This discussion highlighted that although Australia has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, these principals are not enshrined in domestic law (and need to be). We then heard from a range of projects engaging with intersectionality to better understand and support young people in a number of contexts including mental and sexual health. I took the opportunity to discuss my own explorations into [using intersectionality theory in health promotion research and practice](#) and to share some initial work by the [Creative Change Project](#) – which is exploring the role that music can play in promoting social equity. Finally, a panel discussion about Health Promoting Schools highlighted reinvigorated efforts to use this WHO framework in Australia and innovative ways health services are being integrated into schools across the country, not only to support the health of individual young people but to build an environment that supports the wellbeing of all students.

Key learnings for me as a health promotion practitioner included the need to critically self-reflect on all aspects of my work and life and to find ways to meaningfully share power with young people for a better, more equitable future.

