

Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health 2011

A Youthline Position Paper

One of the health priorities of the New Zealand government is positive sexual and reproductive health, as sexuality and sexual identity are fundamental to our sense of self (Ministry of Health, 2001). The two major areas of concern and focus are the increasing number of sexually transmitted infections and the high level of unwanted/ unintended pregnancies, especially among adolescents. The two national documents that address young people's sexual and reproductive health in New Zealand are: Youth Health: A guide to action (Ministry of Health, 2002) and the Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy (Ministry of Health, 2001).

The Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy¹ (Ministry of Health, 2001) outlines what the government hopes to achieve in terms of positive and improved sexual and reproductive health for all New Zealanders. Whilst the Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy is not specifically designed for youth it does make many references to young people, and where and how young people are affected² and what we can do to address these concerns to keep them sexually healthy and safe.

The Youth Health: Guide to Action (Ministry of Health, 2002) talks about changing the way young people's health issues are addressed. It encourages the health sector to be more responsive to young people's needs, and be more youth- focused and youth oriented in their approach (Ministry of Health, 2002). It also recognizes the sexual and reproductive health of young people as one of its five major concerns.

These two documents along with the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002) and over 40 years experience working alongside young people help to guide Youthline's approach in the area of sexual and reproductive health.

¹ The Strategy focuses on two particular areas: *New Zealand's increasing number of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), particularly Chlamydia, gonorrhoea, and HIV; and the high level of unintended/ unwanted pregnancies (Ministry of Health, 2001).*

² Those under the age of 25 accounted for 71% of people diagnosed with Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea, and New Zealand has the third highest teenage birth rate with 27.3 births per 1000 women.

The Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa

The Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (hereafter YDSA) (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002) presents a youth development approach comprising six key principles.

These principles will allow health providers to monitor their interactions with youth in the health sector and provide appropriate responses and treatment. This will ensure young people are provided with positive support and will empower youth to make informed decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health. It is through the lens of the YDSA that Youthline's approach to sexual and reproductive health is expanded on below.

1. Youth development is shaped by the big picture

Young people are shaped by their social, political and economic surroundings, and it is important that young people understand who and what shape their lives. Community awareness about sexuality, sexual behavior and motivation, combined with positive decision making and possible consequences of unsafe sexual practices encourages individuals to make safe and informed sexual and reproductive health decisions.

Youthline facilitates health discussions in Youth health groups and support young people by linking them to health services and health professionals such as nurses, doctors and counsellors. Facilitators from Youthline are involved in youth-led Advisory Councils for District health Boards such as the Counties Manukau Youth Advisory Group (YAG), where health issues affecting youth are discussed and solutions sought.

Youthline has a sexuality policy that recognizes that sexuality is important to how we define ourselves; we respect difference and encourage the community to be aware of attitudes and how that affects others. Youthline also encourages people to build non-judgmental and supportive communities especially for youth of non-heterosexual orientations who may experience discrimination and more challenges around accessing appropriate support.

2. Youth Development is about young people being connected

Young people need to have healthy connections with their families, community, and school and workplace settings. These positive interactions with their surroundings will in turn encourage positive and healthy sexual and reproductive options. Organisations working with young people need to promote safe and accessible sexual health services that are culturally, and gender diverse; connected to other health services; and provide easy access to treatment.

Counselling and family support sessions offered at Youthline encourage parents and caregivers to discuss issues or concerns and to gain skills to enhance and maintain open communication with young people in their lives. Young people who engage in these services are provided with information where needed, they are offered a non-judgmental space to share their desires and concerns around sexual and reproductive health, and are supported to make healthy decisions based on their individual needs and circumstances.

The Youthline Pregnancy Centre offers specialised and unbiased support, information and counselling for women in order that they can make a personal and informed decision around pregnancy issues. The Pregnancy Centre also offers miscarriage and post-termination support and will assist women to link with specialist health professionals in the community.

Youthline also provides a one stop shop (Youth lounge) in Manukau, which is in partnership with the Centre for Youth Health to provide young people with medical assistance and support with the help of medical professionals present at the centre.

3. Youth development is based on a consistent strengths-based approach.

Increase individual's understanding and personal skills and teach them to value themselves (personal identity and self-worth) by ensuring appropriate health education is provided for everyone, which aims to increase healthy sexual and reproductive health choices. The skills to practice safe sex and a guide to provide families with skills to support and advise their children regarding aspects that may affect their sexual behavior can pave the way to a sexually healthy younger generation.

Youthline provides an online forum where young people are provided an opportunity to voice their opinions on certain youth issues. Through this forum young people are able to express and be aware of differing views on certain topics and also be able to post topics they would like to learn more about.

Over half of the surveyed youth in a Youthline study (2008) suggested that being able to openly and effectively communicate with their partners and say no to sex would help them stay sexually healthy. Helpline and face to face counselors and are trained to provide young people with information that will encourage them to improve communication with their partners and/ or other adults regarding their sexual health.

Youthline also provides a sexual health assessment criterion as part of the HEADSS³ assessment and this is also done as part of the holistic counseling service and needs assessment for all clients. These services and assessments are done from strength's based and client focused approach.

4. Youth development happens through quality relationships

Young people need to be supported within their community to build and need to have healthy relationships to ensure their positive development. Developing social skills, building healthy relationships and sexuality education can positively impact young people's decision-making ability about sex. As this is an on-going process service providers should be aware of such when working with young people.

Youthline run sexual health programmes on topics such as sexuality, identity and culture, relationships, boundaries and respect, and body image for young people in the community with the help of youth workers and other Youthline support staff. These programmes not only expand young people's knowledge base but it also allows for them to interact and ask questions.

³ HEADSS assessment looks at Home, Education, Activities, Drugs & Alcohol, Sexuality, and Suicide, which helps to form a strength-based management plan.

In research conducted by Youthline (2008) young people stated that parents and caregivers required tools to support sexual health conversations, and be able to provide them with appropriate guidance and support. Young people also stated that they lacked confidence to discuss sexual health queries or concerns, they were unaware of places they could receive information and were worried about confidentiality issues. The fear of consequences prevented young people from being open with their parents or caregivers about their sexual health; Pacific Island and Asian youth were the least likely to speak to their parents.

The same study (Youthline, 2008) identified a multitude of needs relating to sexual and reproductive health such as better education on STIs, condom use, consequences of unprotected sex, to make informed decisions; increased support for non-heterosexual youth; and support for young women who fall pregnant. Youthline counsellors encourage open communication between families and young people, to encourage young people to seek guidance and support regarding their sexual and reproductive health. Also effective relationships between service providers and young people are essential to ensure young people continue using these services. An open, non-judgemental, culturally sensitive and strengths based approach is essential when dealing with youth, these are vital to Youthline's service delivery.

Youthline has a bi-cultural and a multicultural policy which ensures that all staff will have the knowledge and the ability to effectively work with Maori and people of all cultures, and provide the appropriate resources necessary to engage with them.

5. Youth Development is triggered when young people fully participate

Young people learn from reflecting and doing; providing them with opportunities to assert input in things around them through participation and engagement increases their sense of self. This also builds the capacity of the individual and the communities to which the young person belongs.

Youthline conducts research to determine what sexual and reproductive knowledge young people possess and whether they are aware of the services and places where they can go to ask for help and information. A study done by Youthline in 2008 looks at Youth voice about

sexual health, this study discussed the various issues young people had such as lack of knowledge about having sex and preventing diseases, pregnancies and staying safe.

Research conducted by Youthline has identified that there needs to be more information, education and services for youth that are attracted to members of the same sex, or transgendered or transsexual individuals.

A study involving research with alternative education students (Youthline,2008) regarding health practices among alternative education students found that the best youth health services are those that related to the three A's availability, accessibility, acceptability, and providing wrap around services, one-stop shops, peer-led and free youth health services had lasting long-term gains. The students from the study emphasized the need for culturally – friendly, affordable, and easily accessible services that provided immediate and effective treatment, and followed up post-treatment.

6. Youth development needs good information

Young people need to increase their knowledge base about current and relevant information and behavior regarding sexual and reproductive health. This is achieved when organizations can maintain and develop monitoring systems to ensure appropriate and relevant information is collected.

Youthline provides an easily accessible information service through the phone help-lines and the website, which is updated regularly. When there are areas that Youthline is unable to support or provide information for young people are referred to other services and programmes that can provide them with information that they require. Information regarding health is also given during programmes run by Youthline as part of the assessment, and if further support or information is required then they are either referred on to health services or to health professionals.

Youthline provides counselling for youth of any sexual orientation, or are just unsure and want someone to talk to. Young people are also directed to organizations such as Rainbow Youth

who work with Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered youth (GLBT) and can provide more information for young people who may be exploring their gender and sexual identity.

Youthline also has a sexual health policy that phone counselors are to follow when discussing sexual health issues with young people who phone or text in. The policy is a guide that can be referred to when working with young people who have sexual health concerns.

CONCLUSION:

Sexual and reproductive health is extremely important to the well-being of a young person. The government has recognized the need for better health service and information provision to young people to encourage them to make positive and safe sexual and reproductive health decisions. Young people are affected by their environment and the type of support and knowledge available to them, thus changing society's attitudes and behavior by providing information and increasing personal knowledge can foster positive outcomes for young people. Also easily accessible youth health services, with culturally and non-judgmental staff can enable them to make more informed decisions and stay safe and healthy, and continue to successfully contribute to community.

YOUTHLINE'S POSITION

Youthline takes the position that:

- There needs to be increased awareness about sexual and reproductive health and what precautions can be taken to ensure a safety of young people i.e who to call about sexual violation/violence help and support, or information about non-heterosexual information for youth.
- Young people need to have a safe and secure environment where they can easily access appropriate information.
- Reducing the barriers to accessing services and help, such as easy access, services and information provided through mediums popular with young people, i.e text, email, and website.

- Have positive media coverage about safe sex and appropriate responses to sexual and reproductive health.
- Encourage youth health services to be youth-friendly and non-judgmental towards young people with queries and treatment regarding sexual and reproductive concerns.
- Health service providers need to work from strength's based approach, and refer to the YDSA and the Youth Health: Guide to action as guidelines and a framework when working with young people.
- There needs to be more information, services and education for youth with non-heterosexual orientations.
- More information and education need to be given to young people about sexual abuse and sexual violence and who and where they can go to get support and help if that occurs or is at a risk of occurring.
- Parents/Guardians should be supportive to youth and maintain open communication, to ensure the safety of their child and also to provide appropriate advice regarding sexual relationships.
- Provide families of young people with an understanding of youth perspectives to support their young people or to provide them with support from other services to ensure both the families and the young people receive appropriate information to deal with sexual and reproductive health concerns.
- Encourage the development of a youth specific sexual and reproductive health strategy or guide to when working with young people.

USEFUL LINKS:

www.theword.org.nz

www.familyplanning.org.nz

www.urge.co.nz/sex

www.youthscene.co.nz/sexual_health.shtml

<http://www.moh.govt.nz/sexualhealth>

<http://www.thepulse.org.nz/Me/My-Body/Sexuality/>

www.ashs.org.nz (offers free sexual health checks)

<http://www.rainbowyouth.org.nz/>

<http://www.sexrespect.co.nz/>

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