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This week - research spotlight on the connections between diet and mental health in young people; increasing pressure from child welfare groups to stop detention of young asylum seekers; and, a worrying rise in instances of STIs in young people.

Research and reports
Research spotlight: A connection between diet and mental health?

An investigation into the relationships between measures of diet quality and adolescent mental health forms the basis of a new study from a group of Australian researchers released this week. The collaborative research paper, *A Prospective Study of Diet Quality and Mental Health in Adolescents*, sought to examine the temporal relationships between diet quality and mental health and the associations between change in diet quality and change in psychological symptoms in youth from Victoria’s Barwon-South Western region. The study found that improvements in diet quality were mirrored by improvements in mental health, while reductions were associated with declining psychological functioning. The reverse causality hypothesis was not supported by the available data.

The new report follows the release of a number of studies in the last 18 months investigating associations between diet quality and mental health. A number of the co-authors of the Prospective study also contributed to a paper published last year, ‘Associations between diet quality and depressed mood in adolescents: results from the Australian Health Neighbourhoods Study’. This paper found that an association between diet quality and adolescent depression exists over and above the influence of socioeconomic, family, and other potential confounding factors.

A paper by Richard Eckersley in the Journal of Youth Studies looks at the rising rates of mental illness and obesity-related health problems and risks in young people, identifying social and cultural changes as the causes of these trends. The author disputes the notion that mortality and self-reported health and happiness are effective indicators of youth health and wellbeing and argues that although these rates have improved for Australian youth, diagnoses of mental disorders are increasing as are rates of overweight and obesity.
A US study ‘Depressive symptoms in adolescence: the association with multiple health risk behaviours’, published in 2010, found that youth who suffered from high levels of depressive symptoms were more likely to meet criteria for obesity, as well as numerous other behaviours contributing to an overall lack of wellbeing. The authors suggested that as many adverse health behaviours continue from adolescence into adulthood, early interventions are needed.

In other research, a community consultation report ‘Teaching Diversities: Same Sex-Attracted Young People, CALD Communities, and Arts-based Community Education’ looks at the experiences of doubly marginalised young people who identify both as same sex-attracted and from multicultural backgrounds. The consultation aims to assess the needs of these young people and to gather community based directives for arts projects to support the young people themselves and to work across sectors to provide community education. The project “seeks to address the causes, not just effects, of homophobia and racism.”

Responding to children and young people’s disclosures of abuse is a practice brief released by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse. The paper contains information to assist family, friends and other adults to respond to a child’s disclosure of abuse and draws on research relating to the timing and manner in which children attempt to alert adults they trust to abuse they may be suffering, as well as giving research based advice as to how to respond to such disclosures.

Visit the ARACY website to access further recent research and reports.

**Government/political**

**A Bright Future for Australian Health and Medical Research**
Mark Butler – Minister for Mental Health
An independent review of health and medical research is being convened to recommend a 10-year strategic health and medical research plan for the nation. The review will be chaired by 2011 Australian of the Year Simon McKeon and includes a number of leading Australian researchers and prominent business leaders. The review will focus on optimising Australia’s capacity to produce world class health and medical research across the research spectrum, from discovery through to translation.

**Working together for people of the APY Lands**
Jenny Macklin – Minister for Indigenous Affairs
Grace Portolesi – South Australian Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation
The Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin and the South Australian Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Grace Portolesi have agreed on actions to help support families and create safe communities for children living in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands. The actions include construction of family and wellbeing centres, regulation of community stores, and assistance measures for income management and budgeting. The Ministers also discussed the potential for a broader income management scheme in the APY lands.

**Tagged film to help Australia’s kids get cybersmart**
Stephen Conroy - Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy
Tagged, a new short film to help educate young people about cyberbullying, sexting and protecting their digital reputation, has been launched by the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, Senator Stephen Conroy. The film is a part of the Gillard government’s Cybersafety Plan, which aims to combat online risks to children and help parents and educators protect children from inappropriate material. Tagged can be viewed online or can be ordered for free from the Cybersmart website. Senator Conroy also announced that one of the Gillard Government's most successful online resources – the Cybersafety Help Button – is now available as a mobile phone download.

**Let kids be kids**
Richard Di Natale – Greens spokesperson for multiculturalism
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The Greens disagree with Social Inclusion Minister Tanya Plibersek’s call for all children to take a citizen’s pledge. Senator Di Natale says, “You can’t force patriotism onto the community by making children rote learn a pledge.”

Government must reinstate science education funds: Bandt

Adam Bandt – Greens spokesperson for Science and Research

The Greens have called on the government to reinstate $3.5m in science education funding. Citing the economy’s future need for high levels of science literacy, Adam Bandt has said that the government should retain the very successful Primary Connections and Science by Doing programs run by the Academy of Science. Greens leader Senator Bob Brown will move a motion in the Senate calling on the Government to reinstate the two programs.

Latest news

Nutrition and obesity

Shaming obese people commonly leads to self-blame and a reduced desire to engage in healthy activities like swimming, socialising or exercise, according to a new paper published in the journal Social Science and Medicine. The study shows that some obese people had internalised feelings of self-blame and that stigma does not help them to overcome the health and lifestyle issues associated with being overweight.

Why shaming the obese doesn’t work

Parenting

Just one in five women with children aged under 18 met the national physical activity guidelines of 30 minutes of moderate exercise on most days, Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows. It was important for mums to exercise, not only to improve their own health, but to set a good example for their children. The research also found women who worked 16-34 hours a week were more likely to be sedentary or exercised at lower levels than women who worked 1-15 hours.

Time to step it up, mums told

Youth education, training and employment

Advocates for children who were mistreated in institutions and foster care have called for inclusion of the Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians in the national history curriculum. This follows last week’s call from the Greens and indigenous groups for federal and state education ministers to delay the final authorisation of the curriculum so it could be revised to include more references to the Stolen Generations. Former Democrats senator Andrew Murray, who has been a vocal advocate for children mistreated in care says the former prime minister’s apology in 2009 to those children should also be included in the curriculum.

Call to include history of children mistreated in care in curriculum

The pathway from childhood to adulthood is consistently lengthening as the need for post-school qualifications increases, according to a recent Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth briefing paper. The paper suggests that just finishing school at Year 12 is inadequate for most young people and there is a need to pursue other study, leading to delays in entering the workforce.

Post-school studies postponing adulthood

Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans says low wages are preventing young people from signing up to apprenticeships. The average age of apprentices and trainees is now about 24, with people staying at school longer and commanding higher wages when they left. A 2010 National Centre for Vocational Education Research study found that low wages weren’t the prime reason for low apprenticeship completion rates, but that they could be preventing many apprentices from signing up in the first place.

Govt pushes higher apprentice wages

Older Australians are more likely to be struggling with long-term unemployment
Older Australians are more likely to be struggling with long-term unemployment than younger Australians, according to data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. However, experts in the field argue that there are stigmas and issues in finding employment across all demographics.

Age is a factor in job hunt

Indigenous children and youth

The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women’s Council has warned that nutrition problems for children in South Australia’s remote indigenous communities are amongst the worst in Australia. The Council’s comments add to the debate which has followed recent revelations about health and nutrition in Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands.

Children on Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands reported in health crisis

The Centre for Child Development and Education at Charles Darwin University was launched this week by Chief Minister Paul Henderson. The research focus of the centre will be to look for evidence as to whether policy initiatives are working in order to ensure better outcomes for indigenous children.

Researchers look at ways to improve young lives

Aboriginal children need a modern education that closes the literacy gap and prepares them to deal with global issues such as climate change, according to Lester-Irabinna Rigney, University of Adelaide’s Dean of Aboriginal Education. Prof Rigney says the literacy and numeracy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous education is widening, mostly in rural and regional areas. He says that more work needs to be done to better engage young children and their parents, and it must be done in consultation with indigenous people using a location-based approach.

Aboriginal education needs change: expert

Child and youth health and wellbeing

Unaccompanied children arriving in Australia should be placed in the community, according to Psychologist Amanda Gordon, who advises the Immigration Department and sits on the Detention Health Expert Advisory Group. The Refugee Rights Action Network has also joined the chorus of concern over children being held in detention saying that Serco guards do not have clearances or training to work with children. A spokesperson from Action says keeping them in detention is a form of child abuse.

Action network says detention no place for kids

Detention of asylum seeker children was so damaging it should be considered child abuse, a parliamentary inquiry has been told. Federal politicians have been informed of severe mental health problems among young immigration detainees in the Northern Territory, including the case of an unaccompanied nine-year-old who was hospitalised after attempting suicide. A spokesperson from the Australian Medical Association said that "Detention of asylum seeker children and their families is a form of child abuse."

Holding asylum seeker children likened to abuse

There is a shortage of child health nurses in WA and no plans for more to be employed until at least mid-next year. The WA Government has commissioned a $182,292 research project, Are Child Health Services Meeting the Needs of WA Parents and Children, which will be completed by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research in July.

No more child health nurses

There are concerns that funding for children’s mental health services is not being equitably distributed, with early intervention programs for children aged up to 12 years missing out. Mental health experts say that children with signs of mental illness must get support early. Early signs that a young child may be starting to face mental health issues like anxiety or depression are changes in behaviour such as bedwetting, sleep disturbances, changes to eating patterns.

Kids’ mental health services
**Youth behaviour and sexuality**
Rates of chlamydia and gonorrhoea increased dramatically in the past year, according the HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections in the Australia Annual Surveillance Report. Rates of HIV have remained stable, with modest declines in NSW and Victoria and rises in Queensland and Western Australia. The results have caused concern and imply a need for renewed and targeted prevention efforts, according to UNSW Associate Professor David Wilson.

**Warning on STIs**
The evidence for the need for alcohol tax reform is considerable and beyond challenge, says a spokesperson from the National Alliance for Action on Alcohol. Citing the common practice of excessive drinking among many Australians, including teenagers, the group has called upon the government to address tax policy in order to combat a drinking culture which has many young people drinking to get drunk.

**Alcohol tax reform a major public health issue say health groups**
Alcopops could be fuelling hospital admissions of young people. According to research conducted by David Muscatello of the NSW Health Department's Centre for Epidemiology and Research a correlation has been identified between sales of pre-mixed alcoholic drinks and alcohol related hospitalisations, especially in young women.

**Researcher finds possible link between alcopops and hospitalisations**

**International round-up**

**Gay AB 'would help gay students'**
A new study has found that an openly gay All Black would provide a significant step towards making it easier for young people to come out in New Zealand. The study's author said that gay, bisexual and transgender young people need more role models and suggests including sexual diversity education in teaching degrees, creating support groups in schools, and introducing mandatory sexuality and gender diversity education.

**Better food key to malnutrition and obesity**
An increasing number of countries are facing higher rates of both malnutrition and obesity, and better nutrition is needed in order to reduce both, according to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon. The Scaling Up Nutrition, or SUN, movement calls for countries to tackle malnutrition and obesity by establishing their own attainable health targets. Twenty nations with stunting rates of more than 40 per cent among children under five have committed to developing national strategies to increase access to more nutritious foods.

**More youngsters having unsafe sex: study**
Young people around the world are having more unprotected sex and know less about effective contraception options, according to a survey prepared for World Contraception Day entitled The Clueless or Clued Up: Your Right to be informed about contraception. The researchers on the project say the rise in unprotected sex in several countries raises concerns about the quality of sex education available to young people. A spokesperson said, "The results show that too many young people either lack good knowledge about sexual health, do not feel empowered enough to ask for contraception or have not learned the skills to negotiate contraceptive use with their partners to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies or STIs".

**More news**
Visit the [ARACY website](http://www.aracy.org.au) to access latest news items related to Australia's children and young people.