Department of Health Submission to the Joint Sessional Committee on Gender and Equity Inquiry into Tasmanian Experiences of Gendered Bias in Healthcare





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Introduction and overview

The Department of Health (DoH) welcomes the opportunity to provide information to the Joint Sessional Committee on Gender and Equity's Inquiry into Tasmanian Experiences of Gendered Bias in Healthcare (the Inquiry).

The information provided in this submission to the Inquiry outlines key actions and initiatives underway to respond to the issue of gender bias in health care and to ensure all Tasmanians — whether they are women, men or gender diverse - receive high quality, inclusive and equitable health care.

DoH acknowledges the complexity of this issue and the intent of the Committee to provide an analysis informed by lived experience, however due to confidentiality and privacy requirements, the information provided is at a system level only.

Women, men and gender diverse people have distinct health and wellbeing needs and concerns related to their gender and biological sex. This is illustrated by different rates of injury, illness and mortality, different attitudes towards health and other risks, the way each group uses health services and differences in their health outcomes and wellbeing.

In 2019, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) published two separate reports on the health of Australia's males and females, which explore some of the differences in disease burden and external factors that influence health outcomes. Men and women have different experiences of poverty, incarceration, violence, and homelessness. For example, women are more likely than men to use homelessness services and to be a victim of family violence. Men are more likely to be in prison and to experience physical violence than women. As acknowledged in the *National Men's Health Strategy 2020-30*, men are also more likely to die earlier than women and more often from preventable disease. In its 2018 *Australia's Health Report* the AIHW noted LGBTIQ+ people face disparities in terms of their mental health and sexual health.

Men and women also experience different health and welfare outcomes within particular groups, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, rural and remote communities, and depending on socioeconomic profiles.

There is growing evidence that systemic issues relating to gender bias in healthcare delivery and medical research mean women and gender diverse people often suffer poorer health outcomes. For example, women disproportionately experience delayed diagnosis, overprescribing, a failure to properly investigate symptoms, and have been historically excluded from medical research and trials that could lead to better treatment methods and health outcomes. Trans and gender diverse people are also more likely to experience discrimination and barriers to accessing healthcare, including fear of mistreatment.

Gender inequality is a product of a combination of systems, cultural beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Gender bias in healthcare is a national issue with complex causes that will require a community response and action from Australian governments at all levels.

Women, men and gender diverse people all have the right to equitable access to high-quality, person-centred healthcare. In making this submission to the Inquiry, DoH recognises that sex and gender are distinct concepts and that some Tasmanians who access health care for male or female specific health issues may have a gender identity different from their biological sex.

Department of Health's commitment to equitable and inclusive healthcare services

A person's gender – whether they are male, female or gender diverse - should not influence access to healthcare. The underlying cultural and systemic causes of gender bias in healthcare will require collective action within communities and all levels of government, including state governments and the Commonwealth.

The breadth of action to affect change will encompass a range of actions including, for example: respectful relationships education for children and young people; recognising and mitigating gender bias in medical training that leads to disparities in diagnosis, treatment or poorer health outcomes; and establishing the foundations for more inclusive and diverse medical research.

DoH is committed to understanding, identifying and addressing the causes and effects of both unconscious and explicit gender bias in Tasmania's health system and to providing all Tasmanians with high quality, equitable, accessible and inclusive healthcare.

DoH acknowledges that some services are, for physiological reasons, more likely to be directly accessed or targeted towards people of a particular biological sex (noting this may or may not align with their gender identity). In addition, some services may be accessed unequally by women, men or gender diverse people due to a range of complex, overlapping causes. Some of these causes may have roots in an underlying systemic or cultural or individual gender bias that could present barriers to access, diagnosis or treatment, or lead to poorer health outcomes.

Public health care services in Tasmania should put patients at the centre of their care, at the right time and in the right place. Access to services should be on the basis of clinical need, for example by applying nationally consistent clinical triage categories for emergency department care, or elective surgery urgency categorisation.

The exposure draft of *The Long-Term Plan for Healthcare in Tasmania* 2040, published on 30 March 2023, sets out the Tasmanian Government's long-term vision of Tasmanian health services over the next 20 years. One of six supporting principles of this vision of a world-class, innovative and integrated health system is that it is consumer-centred, where "the health system will engage and partner with consumers in decisions regarding their healthcare and demonstrate respect for consumers' preferences, needs and values to ensure services are safe and culturally appropriate."

Informed by the Standard for Sex, Gender, Variations of Sex Characteristics and Sexual Orientation Variables released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2021, DoH is currently considering the ways that sex and gender information is collected, recorded and managed in its Information and

Communication Technology systems. This work will aim to identify agency systems, forms and processes that can be adapted to be more inclusive of gender diversity.

Case study – Gender accommodation in hospitals project

DoH is currently implementing a consistent statewide Gender Accommodation Protocol based on the success of an existing protocol in operation at the Royal Hobart Hospital that was developed in collaboration with the community.

The Protocol will support respecting patient privacy – a fundamental principle of healthcare provision - by minimising mixed gender accommodation in Tasmanian Health Service hospital wards and units. The Protocol will outline a decision-making framework outlining when providing mixed gender shared rooms is considered appropriate, and practices to apply when same gender rooms, bathrooms or ward bays cannot be provided in the short term due to patient clinical care needs or to deliver effective patient flow and admissions.

DoH notes the Inquiry's Terms of Reference include gender bias in research grant allocation and health related research. Diversity in Australia's health and medical research workforce will lead to better health outcomes for patients. While DoH does not undertake research grant allocations nor direct research, the Inquiry may wish to note the National Health and Medical Research Council recently released its Gender Equity Strategy 2022-2025 to promote gender equity in Australia's health and medical research workforce.

DoH also welcomes the Australian Government's appointment of a new National Women's Health Advisory Council (the Council) to examine the unique challenges that women and girls experience in the health system. As part of its remit, the Council will consider health equity in healthcare and services, health literacy for women in priority populations, strengthening and diversifying medical research, and health workforce training and education. It will also specifically consider key concerns, such as menopause, cancer care, reproductive healthcare, causes of pelvic pain and cardiovascular disease. The Council will provide advice to policy makers that promotes better health outcomes for women and girls, and ensure their care is better tailored to their needs.

Leading systemic cultural change in healthcare: One Health Culture and Our Watch

Systems and organisations are affected by the same culturally embedded gender biases as the broader community. These biases can increase barriers to services and healthcare, particularly for women and gender diverse people. Cultural change in Tasmania at the organisation level is important to deliver a health system:

- Where everyone feels valued, staff are recognised, and individuals feel empowered to make positive changes and are given opportunities for growth.
- That provides positive, patient-centric and solutions-focused environments that meet contemporary and best-practice standards.

One Health Culture

In December 2022, DoH launched its One Health Culture Program (the Program) to realise this vision for Tasmania's health system. Over the next five years, the Program will undertake activities in five key focus areas:

- 1. Leadership and Accountability
- 2. Building Capability
- 3. Workplace Values and Behaviours
- 4. Health, Safety, and Wellbeing and
- 5. Systems and Processes.

This Program will transform DoH's culture to be more inclusive and respectful and support the health workforce to deliver the best possible health care for the Tasmanian community.

Our Watch

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. It takes a gender-based approach to ending violence against women, whereby the underpinning principle is that violence against women starts with gender inequality. Our Watch works to embed gender equality and prevent violence where Australians live, learn, work, and socialise.

Through the development of annual action plans, DoH is working to embed gender equality into business-as-usual processes including in the development of plans, policies and procedures.

DoH's Our Watch Workplace Equality and Respect Standards Action Plan 2022 promotes gender equality and respect within the agency across five standards, including:

- 1. Commitment,
- 2. Conditions
- 3. Culture
- 4. Support
- 5. Core business

As DoH continues to implement actions under the Our Watch initiative, staff will be supported to feel comfortable identifying and calling out inappropriate behaviour, and managers and senior leaders will have access to education and training to be able to actively promote gender equality, manage disclosures and deal with inappropriate behaviours in their teams. An updated Action Plan is in development for 2023.

Through cultural improvement initiatives like One Health Culture and Our Watch that promote gender equality and inclusive service provision DoH is taking action to address any underlying systemic, cultural or individual gender bias within Tasmania's health system that could present barriers to access, diagnosis or treatment for our patients.

Supporting priority population groups access to equitable healthcare

Equity is about people having fair opportunity to attain their full health potential, and no one being disadvantaged in achieving this potential if it can be avoided.

The Tasmanian Government's *Healthy Tasmania Five Year Strategic Plan 2022-26* envisages a future for Tasmania where there are equal health outcomes for priority populations, where health and community services are more inclusive and responsive.

As part of Healthy Tasmania DoH will apply an equity lens across all Healthy Tasmania policies and services to:

- study how the design and implementation of our policies and programs will impact population groups in different ways, and
- ensure we consider the specific needs of priority populations and that our actions have no adverse impacts.

As part of Healthy Tasmania DoH will also provide leadership, resources, training and support to ensure that our health and community services are delivered in ways that are culturally safe and inclusive for priority population groups, including people within the LGBTIQ+ community.

Women's health services

Access to targeted healthcare services, specifically designed to meet and support women's unique healthcare needs is a key strategy within DoH's remit that can help mitigate gender bias in healthcare settings.

Examples of women's specific services or initiatives delivered by DoH include (but are not limited to):

- Perinatal and infant mental health services to support pregnant women with pre-existing or new mental health illnesses or concerns in the antenatal period and up to 12 months in the post-natal period.
- The Women's Health Clinic, DoH's statewide tertiary referral centre for high-risk pregnancy, planning and management (in addition to public pregnancy, birth, and parenting services across Tasmania).
- Providing state-of-the-art health facilities for women's services in the new Royal Hobart Hospital K Block – including pregnancy assessment, birthing and maternity, and women's surgical units.
- Population and cancer screening programs, including BreastScreen Tasmania and the National Cervical Screening Program.
- Recently establishing a Tasmanian Gynaecology and Reproductive Health Network to enhance
 the experience and delivery of quality healthcare for patients accessing the public sector for
 gynaecology and reproductive health services in Tasmania.
- Funding to support Women's Health Tasmania, and the Youth Health Fund (administered by The Link Youth Health Service) to assist women and young people access sexual and reproductive healthcare and information.
- Funding to support Family Planning Tasmania deliver services, including:
 - Improved sexual and reproductive health for Tasmanians, including a focus on health equity, promoting sexual health and wellbeing, and increasing health literacy. This funding has a focus on priority populations including people with disability, people from the LGBTIQ+ community, young people, Aboriginal people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people from humanitarian backgrounds, people from low socio-economic areas, and people in rural and remote areas.
 - Specialised service provision for diagnostic, clinical and supportive care (ultrasound, pessary fittings and colposcopy).

DoH is particularly focused on improving access to maternity services in regional Tasmania. In September 2022, a brand new \$5.8 million antenatal clinic opened at the North West Regional Hospital to provide support to mothers and babies. Importantly, the facility supports continuity of care by providing a new home for DoH's Midwifery Group Practice service. This service enables women to access care from the same midwife both before and after their baby is born which supports positive patient outcomes.

Case study: 30 years of service – BreastScreen Tasmania

BreastScreen Tasmania has recently celebrated 30 years of providing free breast cancer screening for women, diagnosing more than 3 600 breast cancers.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed in Australia, with 75 per cent of all breast cancers occurring in women over the age of 50. During this time, the impact of breast cancer mortality in Tasmania has improved significantly in the target age group 50-74, decreasing from 74 deaths per 100 000 women in 1991 to 41 deaths per 100 000 women in 2020.

BreastScreen Tasmania's success rates demonstrates excellence in providing women-centred health services. The 2023 Report on Government Services showed that Tasmania is leading the country for breast screening, sitting at 10 per cent above the national participation rate for the target age group (50-74 years).

Through strategies like the mobile screening BreastScreen buses, BreastScreen Tasmania supports women in Hobart, Launceston and across regional and rural Tasmania to have ready access to life-saving breast screening services all year round.

Health and Wellbeing for Women Action Plan 2020-2023

In collaboration with key Tasmanian government agencies, including DoH, the Department of Premier and Cabinet developed Tasmania's *Health and Wellbeing for Women Action Plan 2020-2023* (the Action Plan). The Action Plan is focussed on progressing actions to improve women's health and wellbeing, recognising that women continue to face barriers in health care access.

DoH is supporting delivery of the Action Plan's Strategic Priorities to: improve women's maternal sexual and reproductive health; improve health literacy and target preventive health services; enhance women's mental health and wellbeing; facilitate health and wellbeing across the life course; and address impacts on women's health such as violence against women and girls, homelessness, and other related factors.

A few key examples of initiatives DoH is leading under the Action Plan include working to reduce smoking rates for women and girls, particularly during pregnancy; improving prevention and management of chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease and dementia; and using the Tasmanian Suicide Register to understand female suicide in Tasmania.

LGBTIQ+ inclusive services

DoH believes all Tasmanians have the right to access services, including LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians, their friends, and families.

Research indicates that experiences with health services can be negative for many LGBTIQ+ people. Since 1999, DoH has had an LGBTIQ+ Reference Group to help consider ways to improve access and opportunities for LGBTIQ+ people. The Reference Group is co-chaired by the Secretary, DoH and a nominated community representative. Membership organisations include Equal Opportunity Tasmania, Primary Health Tasmania, TasCAHRD, Rainbow Tasmania, FPLAG, Equality Tasmania, Working it Out, Women's Health Tasmania and Health Consumers Tasmania. The Reference Group also provides oversight of DoH's Sex and Gender Reform activities.

With the support of the Reference Group DoH launched its LGBTIQ+ inclusive healthcare learning resources for Tasmanian health sector staff in December 2021, to train, inform and reorient the public health workforce. The learning resources aim to ensure our health system is inclusive, welcoming, safe, and respectful for LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians.

DoH staff are expected to treat patients, clients and colleagues with respect – regardless of their sex, sexual orientation and gender identify. This includes not assuming a person's sex or gender based on things such as name, voice or appearance.

Following the passage of the *Justice and Related Legislation (Marriage and Gender Amendments) Act 2019* DoH established a strategic Sex and Gender Reform Senior Advisory Group to actively review its systems and processes in relation to the collection, management and communication of sex and gender information across the health system, to ensure this information is managed in an inclusive, non-discriminatory way.

Case study – Rethink 2020 and Tasmanian Suicide Prevention Strategy 2023-2027

Under Rethink 2020, Tasmania's overarching mental health plan, DoH has committed to exploring a concept model for an LGBTIQ+-specific mental health service. A consultant will be engaged in 2023 to undertake this work. Peer navigators have been established in Working it Out to help LGBTIQ+ people, their friends and families to better access the supports and information they need to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Other actions under Rethink include embedding the LGBTIQ-inclusive practice online training modules for all DoH staff and developing an auditing tool for DoH services to assess how they are meeting the needs of LGBTIQ+ people.

The newly released *Tasmanian Suicide Prevention Strategy 2023-2027* includes priority actions to reduce suicide and the impacts of suicide on specific population groups deemed at higher risk of suicide, including men, young people and LGBTIQ+ people.

The Tasmanian Gender Service

Transgender and gender diverse individuals frequently experience significant gender dysphoria characterised by distress that arises from incongruence between a person's gender identity and their sex assigned at birth. Transgender and gender diverse people are one of the most vulnerable groups in our community due to experiencing high levels of stigma, discrimination, distress, depression and/or mental health issues.

The rates of mental health difficulties including suicide, eating disorders, depression, anxiety and selfharm and suicide in transgender and gender diverse young people are amongst the highest of any child and adolescent cohort.

The Tasmanian Gender Service was established in 2018 as a specialised clinic within the Tasmanian Health Service. It provides multidisciplinary, person-centred care to trans and gender diverse children and young people aged 16 years and under, that is informed and consistent with the Australian Standards of Care and Treatment Guidelines for Trans and Gender Diverse Children and Adolescents.

Public gender affirming care for people aged 17 years and over is provided by the Statewide Sexual Health Service, with clinics in Hobart and Launceston and an outreach clinic in Devonport.

In addition to gender affirming care, the service treats and manages sexually transmissible infections, HIV, Hepatitis C and sexual functioning conditions impacting sexuality.

Legal recognition of sex and gender

The Tasmanian Government is currently considering issues related to medical interventions on people with intersex characteristics in response to the recommendations of the Tasmanian Law Reform Institute's (TLRI) Report on the *Legal Recognition of Sex and Gender*.

In September 2022, the Tasmanian Government tabled the Justice and Related Legislation Miscellaneous Amendments Bill 2022, which included amending the long title of the *Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1999* to recognise it provides legal recognition for trans and gender-diverse Tasmanians.

DoH is examining the current arrangements in place in Tasmania, the arrangements in place in other jurisdictions, and the needs of Tasmanian families. We will ensure that Tasmania's approach is based on community consultation and expert advice, with a priority focus on best practice and patient-centred care.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity conversion practices

DoH acknowledges the harm caused to individuals caused by Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity conversion practices as highlighted in the recent TLRI Report: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Conversion Practices. In response to the Report, the Tasmanian Government has made a commitment to reform legislative arrangements to ban conversion practices.

In response to the 2020 review of the *Mental Health Act 2013 (Tas)*, the Tasmanian Government is making amendments to that Act to clarify that a person is not to be taken to have a mental illness by reason only of that person's gender identity or expression.

Tasmanian Government commitment to equitable and inclusive communities

Gender Budget Statement

The Tasmanian Government delivered its first Gender Budget Statement as part of the 2022-23 State Budget. The Gender Budget Statement highlighted the work the Tasmanian Government is doing to target inequalities experienced by women, men and gender diverse Tasmanians. DoH is participating actively in this work to ensure the gender lens is applied to DoH budget initiatives within the whole-of-government framework.

The Tasmanian Government has also committed to develop a Gender Impact Assessment process to analyse the gender impact of policies, programs and services, commonly called applying a 'gender lens'.

DoH will continue to contribute to further work underway to increase the detail and complexity of the annual Gender Budget Statement with the application of the Gender Impact Assessment and evaluation process when it becomes available.

Tasmanian Women's Strategy 2022-2027

The Tasmanian Government is taking action to address the causes and effects of gender inequality and deliver health and community services that are inclusive and responsive.

In December 2022, the Tasmanian Government released its *Tasmanian Women's Strategy* 2022-2027 (the Women's Strategy) which sets out the Government's commitment to achieve gender equality.

Gender analysis can also be a powerful tool for gaining a more nuanced understanding about the social determinants of health, as well as how women's reproductive health across the life cycle influences other areas of women's lives, such as economic security and safety. As an example, understanding the extent to which menopause affects women's wellbeing and productivity is essential for considering policy levers to improve women's workforce participation and the gender pay gap.

As part of the Women's Strategy, tools and supporting information will be used by government agencies to design for the diverse, intersectional needs of Tasmanian women and girls at each stage of life.

Whole-of-government Framework for LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians

The Tasmanian Government is committed to ensuring LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians, their friends and families are included and have equal opportunity to participate in, and contribute to, Tasmania's social, political, economic and cultural life.

In 2022, the Tasmanian Government funded the University of Tasmania to undertake a survey of LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians 16 years and over to understand their experiences of using government services and programs. The findings of the survey will inform a new whole-of-government framework and action plan to help ensure LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians have equal access to government programs and services, regardless of their relationship status, sexuality, gender identity or intersex characteristics. The Framework is expected to be released later in 2023.

Conclusion

DoH is committed to understanding, identifying and addressing the causes and effects of both unconscious and explicit gender bias in Tasmania's health system and to provide all Tasmanians with high quality, equitable, accessible and inclusive healthcare.

On 30 March 2023, the Tasmanian Government published an exposure draft of its Long-Term Plan for Healthcare in Tasmania 2040. Forming part of *Our Healthcare Future* Stage Two reforms, this plan sets an aspirational vision and policy direction for how healthcare will be delivered in Tasmania, now and over the next 20 years:

All Tasmanians are supported by a world class, innovative and integrated health system.

By providing high quality services to Tasmanians that are effective, inclusive and equitable we strive to deliver on our vision of a consumer centred and collaborative health system where all Tasmanians – men, women and gender diverse - feel safe and respected.

Addressing the causes and effects of gender bias in healthcare requires a collective commitment to action by individuals, communities and governments across Australia encompassing culture, practice, policy and research.

DoH welcomes any learnings from this Inquiry that will contribute to a system-wide understanding of areas of healthcare in Tasmania where gender bias may be more prevalent and best practice approaches that can be taken in response.