

# Critical mass

Obesity, mental illness, risky behaviour and a lack of funding for research and health initiatives makes adolescence a hazardous time for youth, writes **Melissa Sweet**

**M**any of the major health problems confronting Australia – such as obesity and mental illnesses – emerge during adolescence and early adulthood.

Adolescence is also a critical period for establishing lifestyle behaviours, including those around nutrition, physical activity, alcohol and drugs, which can have lifelong ramifications for health.

Yet the specialty of adolescent medicine is relatively under-developed in Australia, meaning the area often is given low priority in research, clinical services and public health programs.

But the University of Sydney's Medical Foundation is hoping to push adolescence higher up the health agenda with the launch later this year of a campaign to establish a Chair in Adolescent Medicine at the Children's Hospital at Westmead.

"Adolescent health has been somewhat neglected," says the president of the Foundation, Mr Richard Caldwell, "because of a perception that adolescence is a period of robustness and doesn't require funding."

A recent Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Report (see breakout) backs up Mr Caldwell's concerns, showing high rates of mental health problems and risk-taking behaviour among youth.

The Foundation hopes to raise \$4.5 million to establish the Chair in perpetuity, in conjunction with the NSW Government. Mr Caldwell expects the Chair to attract additional expertise and funding, to build a strong "backbone" in adolescent health programs.

Adolescents in rural and remote Australia will be a priority focus, reflecting concerns that they are at increased risk of a range of health problems while having worse access than their city cousins to services.

Meanwhile, greater insights into the health of rural children and adolescents are expected to emerge from a major new project being undertaken by University of Sydney researchers. The study, which

will follow a cohort of rural youth, aged 10 to 18, will investigate what factors influence their physical and mental well-being.

Dr Susan Towns, a senior staff specialist and head of the Department of Adolescent Medicine at the Children's Hospital at Westmead, who will be involved in the Foundation's awareness-raising campaign, says health professionals and services could do much more to cater to adolescents' particular needs. The department, Australia's first multi-disciplinary hospital-based adolescent service, has been advocating a more responsive approach to young people's special health needs since 1977.

"Access to health care is a big issue for young adolescents," she says. "They don't know how to negotiate the system. They may be reluctant to see the family doctor or any health professional and, if they do, they may not be assured of confidentiality which can really limit the effectiveness of the consultation.

"All of these things are much more of a problem in the country than the city."

Dr Towns says parents are also eager for information about how to better support their children through adolescence and all its attendant trials.

"You almost need a parenting booster when you get to the adolescent years," she says.

Dr Towns advises setting clear rules covering what behaviour is acceptable, particularly around smoking, alcohol and other drugs.

"Teenagers respond to structures and support that are negotiated within a framework of rules and boundaries," she says. "You have to be warm and empathic and nurturing, but at the same time create the boundaries that teenagers need to work within."

Dr Towns says binge drinking is an increasing health threat for youth – and that often parents are contributing. "More and more data shows that a lot of parents are supplying under-age kids and parties with alcohol," she says.



illustration: Sarah Duke

When it comes to obesity, adolescence is both a time of threat and opportunity. It is a high risk time for gaining weight, but intervening with overweight teenagers produces much better results than trying to intervene with adult obesity.

“Get it right in early adolescence and you set them on a path to healthy adulthood,” says Dr Towns.

Meanwhile, Professor Ian Hickie, executive director of the Brain and Mind Research Institute at the University of Sydney, agrees that health services could do far more to meet the needs of youth, particularly in mental health.

Youth are a priority of the Institute, which was established in 2003, bringing together patients, support groups and front-line carers, including psychiatrists, neurologists and neurosurgeons, with scientists working in neurosciences and brain research.

“The overwhelming health issues of young people are mental health and substance abuse,” says Professor Hickie.

But he says Australia has been slow to reorient its mental health services in response to ever-accumulating evidence that adolescence and early adulthood is a critical time for intervention as it is when many major mental illnesses emerge.

“Fifteen to 25 is where it’s all at in terms of early intervention but (medical school) teaching remains largely focused on chronicity, or treating people when they are 40,” he says.

“We need a major system change and redirection of services, but getting the Titanic to turn that way is rather difficult.” ■

*Melissa Sweet is the author of The Big Fat Conspiracy: How to protect your family’s health (ABC Books, \$32.95), which includes tips for families, communities, governments and other groups for tackling the epidemic of obesity in children and adolescents. It also profiles the work of many University of Sydney academics.*

- Increasing numbers of young Australian are reporting high or very high levels of psychological distress. In 2004-5, 12 per cent of men aged 18 to 24 and 19 per cent of women reported high or very high levels of distress. This was an increase from 1997 when 7 per cent of men and 13 per cent of women reported such problems.
- In 2004-5, 51 per cent of young women and 40 per cent of young men reported moderate to very high levels of psychological distress.
- Eighteen per cent of young people had a psychiatric condition, with anxiety and depression the most common problems.
- Death rates among young people aged 12-24 halved between 1980 and 2004, largely due to decreases in death due to injury.
- One quarter of young people was overweight or obese in 2004-5.
- Recommended physical activity guidelines were being met by 46 per cent of males and 30 per cent of females in 2004-5.
- Drinking alcohol in amounts to put them at risk of harm was reported by 31 per cent of young people.
- Around 17 percent of young people were current smokers in 2004.

Source: *Young Australians, Their health and well-being 2007*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

