

working well
newsletter
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Issue 22

mcwh: putting immigrant & refugee
women's health first!



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program updates

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women's health
australia:
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national program

Multicultural Centre for Women's Health is an immigrant and refugee women's organisation committed to improving the health and wellbeing of immigrant and refugee women across Australia.

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sharing our stories:
human rights project

**A Woman-to-Woman Approach
to Human Rights Education**

Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world ... Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.

Eleanor Roosevelt

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Eleanor Roosevelt's oft-cited quote lies at the heart of efforts to foster a better understanding of human rights within the community. For immigrant and refugee women, understanding human rights is a process which can involve reflecting on various individual and collective identities, including being a woman, a migrant, a carer, and a working parent.

Multicultural Centre for Women's Health has recently received funding from the Attorney General's Department (Fed) to conduct 30 human rights education sessions with immigrant and refugee women. The Sharing Our Stories (SOS) Project: A Woman-to-Woman Approach will be delivered throughout Victoria by the MCWH team of Bilingual Health Educators in a range of community languages. Although all MCWH activities and projects are informed by a human rights-based approach, the SOS project will build upon the organisation's considerable

expertise in delivering tailored community education to immigrant and refugee women.

The SOS project will enable immigrant and refugee women to access human rights information in their language of choice—one major challenge of the project will be the translation of human rights responsibilities and freedoms to women's everyday lives. A key feature of the SOS project will be the use of a narrative or story-telling approach in both the training of the Educators and the community education sessions. 'Sharing stories' has been a key teaching and learning strategy of the MCWH Health Education Program and has proven to be effective in facilitating a better understanding of issues affecting women's health and wellbeing. The education session content will therefore focus on the development of a suite of case studies in order to illustrate human rights issues and problems in the context of women's own experiences, perceptions and everyday lives. The collection of women's stories in relation to human rights issues and concerns will also form an integral part of the project evaluation.

Work is currently being carried out for the Bilingual Health Educators' two-day training program scheduled for the end of August. The education sessions will be conducted from September to November. Bookings can be made by contacting Regina Quiazon via email regina@mcwh.com.au or telephone (03) 9418 0919.

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alcohol in at-risk communities project

Delivering Alcohol Information to At-Risk Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities

Cheers? This is the lead phrase in the health message currently being promoted as part of the Alcohol Project. The message, translated in five languages, asks us to think more carefully about what it is we are toasting when drinking alcohol.

arabic	<p>Conducted with Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre and the Department of Health (VIC), the project will run for 12 months. It aims to spread health promotion messages about alcohol-related risks and harms to five communities identified as 'at risk' due to a number of factors, including a poor understanding of the health service system, and the lack of access to culturally sensitive treatment services. By July, approximately 30 health promotion sessions will have been conducted with groups from the Arabic, Polish, Spanish, Sudanese and Vietnamese communities. Posters and brochures have also been developed in the five languages, after extensive consultation with the communities.</p> <p>Initially, the communities showed little interest in participation, despite the sessions being promoted as 'reducing risk to benefit the family'. Feedback received from community group organisers and our Bilingual Educators working within their communities were unanimous: individuals, especially those from a Muslim background, were reluctant to participate in an 'alcohol session' either because they felt it was not needed or their attendance might lead to</p>
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misperceptions and stigmatisation within their community. In order to address these issues, the alcohol information was incorporated into MCWH's 'Healthy Living' education module, which focuses on promoting healthy lifestyle choices to prevent the onset of Type 2 diabetes. This approach proved to be beneficial and offered session participants the opportunity to speak more freely about alcohol, on their own terms, and in the context of other health issues.

In some of the sessions conducted with the Arabic community, for example, alcohol information was delivered in relation to the challenges of raising children in Australian society. The group shared stories in relation to managing and negotiating cultural boundaries and focused on ways to help others who may have resorted to excessive drinking. In another session conducted with the Vietnamese community, reducing alcohol consumption was discussed in the context of living not so much a healthy, but a *happier* life. The Bilingual Educator then provided relaxation advice and slow breathing exercises during the session.

An alcohol information resource pack containing a 'Cheers?' poster and brochures (in Arabic, Polish, Spanish, Sudanese-Arabic and Vietnamese) is currently being distributed to general practices, multicultural and ethno-specific groups, and community organisations. To obtain an information pack, please contact Deb Jonson: telephone (03) 8413 8700 or email deborahj@turningpoint.org.au

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Perhaps most exciting is the establishment of a national network, made up of organisations in each state and territory that currently work with immigrant and refugee women on sexual and reproductive health issues.

MWHA

multicultural women's health australia

mcwh's *new* national program

by dr adele murdolo
executive director
mcwh



MWHA will create links with and between national, state/territory, and local key stakeholders in immigrant and refugee women's sexual and reproductive health, who have never before been provided with opportunities for communication, collaboration, coordination and networking.

Why MWHA?

It is by now well established that immigrant and refugee women have poorer health outcomes than Australian-born women, with a marked deterioration in their health status showing within 3-5 years of settlement in Australia. With particular respect to sexual and reproductive health, immigrant and refugee women are at significant risk of adverse outcomes. They are at particular risk of developing gestational diabetes and ovarian cancer for example, and are more likely to deliver their babies via caesarean section, among some communities, at rates that far exceed the World Health Organisation recommendation of 10 per cent. Immigrant and refugee women are less likely to have information about the full range of contraception methods available to them; they are also less likely to commence timely antenatal care, and/or to access available preventative services. Women's country of birth is also a significant risk factor for maternal and baby health outcomes.

From Five-Point Plan to National Program

In response to these troubling statistics, last year MCWH developed a five-point plan for immigrant and refugee women's health (see December 2010 *Working Well*), advocating for: a focus on prevention, more multilingual education, improved access to health services, more targeted and accurate research, and for an appropriate level of national funding to be allocated to these issues.

We only need to spend \$2.70 for every immigrant woman living in Australia today, to develop a comprehensive and coordinated preventative health program for immigrant and refugee women. Expenditure at the preventative end of the system saves thousands at the acute end.

MWHA Garner Federal Funds

We are pleased to announce that the Federal Government has made some in-roads into increasing its expenditure on preventative measures relating to immigrant and refugee women's sexual and reproductive health, and that it has allocated funds to MCWH over the next two years to establish a new program.

MWHA: the First Two Years

Over the next two years MCWH will establish and conduct a new national program that will improve the capacity of immigrant and refugee women to make informed choices about sexual and reproductive health. Following a three-tier national strategy—providing multilingual information, professional development, and advocacy—the new program, Multicultural Women's Health Australia (MWHA), will work with women, service providers, researchers and government to achieve that goal.

Over the next year, we will establish an '1800' national telephone number and a MWHA Website. An integral part of the website will be a searchable web-based portal to nationally available, up-to-date, quality multilingual sexual and reproductive health resources (currently 5,760 items in 43 languages). A professional development, support and resource program will be run, as well as an advocacy, policy and research component. MWHA will have the capacity to provide up-to-date data and policy advice with particular reference to immigrant and refugee women's health. This is important as there is currently no other organisation nationally that has the expertise and knowledge about these issues. In the development of national policy, it is often the case that the specific health and wellbeing issues for immigrant and refugee women are not taken into account.

A Strategic Approach to Research

The MWHA will implement strategies to address the paucity of relevant, up-to-date and accurate research that is available on immigrant and refugee women's health. In this regard, the new program will engage researchers currently working in the field of immigrant and refugee women's health, or in related fields, and develop ways of working collaboratively to improve the availability of the evidence base. Without this evidence base, we simply do not know enough about trends in immigrant and refugee women's health and wellbeing. Our current data is disturbing and indicates that there is much to be done. However, it is not comprehensive or detailed enough to provide us with the exact information needed to develop targeted and effective policy and health promotion strategies.

A National Network: Connecting With Immigrant and Refugee Women's Health

Perhaps most exciting is the establishment of a national network, made up of organisations in each state and territory that currently work with immigrant and refugee women on sexual and reproductive health issues. Members of the MWHA Network are state and/or territory-based women's and/or multicultural health organisations with a core focus on immigrant and refugee women's health and wellbeing.

The network is made up of the following members:

- NSW Women's Health at Work Program
- Immigrant Women's Health Service (NSW)
- Women's Centre for Health Matters (ACT)
- Migrant Health Service (SA)
- Australian Red Cross Migration Programs Tasmania
- Ishar Multicultural Women's Health Centre (WA)
- Immigrant Women's Support Services (QLD)
- Melaleuca Refugee Centre (NT).

Working Together for Better Immigrant and Refugee Women Health Outcomes

MWHA will work together with the Network to coordinate programs nationally, share health promotion strategies, resources and local knowledge, and facilitate collaboration and referral. The Network will facilitate communication among and across services in each state and territory that provide health promotion specifically to immigrant and refugee women, providing opportunities for ongoing communication, coordination and collaboration. Agencies in each state and territory will have an increased capacity for the sharing of resources, health promotion strategies, analysis, evaluation or learnings across Australia. Without this capacity for sharing, a wealth of knowledge, experience and expertise is at risk of being lost while each agency re-invents the wheel. This includes knowledge about the local issues impacting on immigrant and refugee women's sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing; through the MWHA this will be shared with sister agencies in other states and territories, instead of potentially being lost. This shared knowledge will facilitate the development of effective advocacy strategies and resources—local or national—to address arising issues.

The MWHA will collaborate with state and territory-based member agencies to better meet the sexual and reproductive needs of the local populations. Depending on the issue, professional development, where the member agency has identified a local need, might be provided, or the member agency might provide a referral to the MWHA website and 1800 number. Similarly, once an agency or individual has used the MWHA national services, there could be a referral back to a state and territory-based agency for more sustained and locally-based programs if appropriate.

MWHA will create links with and between national, state/territory, and local key stakeholders in immigrant and refugee women's sexual and reproductive health, who have never before been provided with opportunities for communication, collaboration, coordination and networking. These new national links will strengthen the relationships and collaborations that state and territory-based organisations have with their local agencies, due to an enhanced capacity to provide up-to-date, accurate information, knowledge and resources on immigrant and refugee women's health and wellbeing.

Harnessing Potential in Immigrant and Refugee Women's Health Across Australia

The potential of the new MWHA is large and we do expect that each activity will grow over time as evidence emerges about the most effective next steps to take. For now, we are happy to start relatively small, knowing that small and steady gains will develop into larger ones if properly harnessed. The program will be comprehensively evaluated and the findings shared with our key stakeholders. In the meantime we are so pleased that we can take some further positive steps toward improving the sexual and reproductive health of immigrant and refugee women on a national level.

For further information about the MWHA Program please contact:

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Telephone 03 9418 0923 or Email: director@mcwh.com.au

Dr Regina Quiazon Health Promotion & Project Officer
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The first program bulletin will be distributed in September and be posted online.

multilingual fact sheets project

The Multicultural Centre for Women's Health is developing fact sheets on Pregnancy, Birth, Contraception, Making Choices About Your Pregnancy, Vaginal Health, and Vaginal Health Problems. When complete, they will be available in Amharic, Hindi, Farsi, Macedonian and Thai and will be online at www.mcwh.com.au.

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- The *Contraception Fact Sheet* details what contraceptive options are available to women. It also provides information on how life stage and lifestyle can impact on contraception-related decisions. *Making Choices About Your Pregnancy* discusses options women have about being pregnant, being a parent and raising children. Choices, emergency contraception, abortion, foster care and adoption are all covered. Thank you to Kathleen McNamee (Family Planning Victoria) and Melinda Gibbs (Marie Stopes International) who have assisted us with these fact sheets.
- The *Vaginal Health Fact Sheet* takes an anatomical look at the vagina and encourages women to get to know this part of their body. It also provides tips about vaginal health and hygiene. *Vaginal Health Problems* looks at the diagnosis of certain vaginal infections, and their causes, symptoms, and treatments. Medical and complementary therapies related to

vaginal health are also covered. Dermatological conditions and chronic pain are also featured. It is important that women seek medical advice sooner rather than later because if left untreated, vaginal health problems can affect reproductive and sexual health, as well as impact on emotional and mental health. Dr Vicki Kotsirilos (Australian Integrative Medicine Association) has contributed to both the *Vaginal Health* and *Vaginal Health Problems* fact sheets. Kathleen McNamee (FPV) has contributed to the *Vaginal Health Fact Sheet*. Thank you to you both.

MCWH is still in the process of finalising the Pregnancy and Birth fact sheets. The *Pregnancy Fact Sheet* highlights the importance of pregnancy care, women's rights and responsibilities when using hospital maternity care, healthy eating and physical activity during pregnancy, the trimesters of pregnancy, emotional health and taking care of yourself and your baby, and tests during pregnancy. The *Birth Fact Sheet* details the stages of labour, pain management, the types of birth, and emotional health. Maureen Johnson (The Women's Hospital), Catherine Chamberlain and Kerrie Papacostas (Southern Health), have all contributed to these fact sheets. Thank you.

Providing information to women in their languages, encouraging them to be more aware of their body, and increasing their awareness of relevant services are at the core of what this project will achieve.

carmela pitt
multilingual library coordinator

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creating better access project

Building on the Healthy Credit Project, the recently-completed Creating Better Access Project has extended MCWH's work in delivering culturally-appropriate credit education for immigrant and refugee women.

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- Forty-seven credit education sessions were delivered to immigrant and refugee women in 12 languages. Overall, 502 women from 24 countries participated in the education sessions. Three of the 47 education sessions were articles published in the *Melb Thai* magazine with a distribution of 3000 copies.
- In addition to reaching a substantial number of women, the project garnered other important outcomes. It increased the number of MCWH Bilingual Health Educators trained in credit and debt-related issues, thereby extending the reach of the credit education program, whilst also enhancing the skills of the Educators trained during the Healthy Credit Project.
- The project also increased service provider awareness of the credit and debt-related issues of immigrant and refugee women, the result of an Australia-wide engagement process with financial counsellors and community legal centre staff. The engagement process represented a major difference in scope when compared to the Healthy Credit Project.
- During the Healthy Credit Project, a narrative-based approach to credit education for immigrant and refugee women was developed, where four case studies were used to highlight

key credit and debt-related issues and their possible solutions. The Creating Better Access Project built on this approach to education delivery, doubling to eight the case studies available to our Educators to discuss in the education sessions. This approach proved popular with women as indicated in the following quote:

'The women responded very positively. They found the case studies very interesting and reflective of relevant issues in their life. Several women shared their experiences and asked questions.'

Bilingual Health Educator

The implications for MCWH's future practice in relation to credit education delivery are significant. Credit and debt education modules are now an established part of the MCWH Health Education Program. The Creating Better Access Project has also raised the potential for partnerships with key service providers, namely peak bodies for financial counsellors and for community legal centres.

Many thanks to the advisory committee and also to the organisations and groups who participated in the project.

carolyn poljski
health promotion &
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✦ subscribe to working well

'Working Well' is the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health newsletter. Keep up-to-date with projects and programs and the issues affecting immigrant and refugee women's health and wellbeing. Contact us and we will put you on the mailing list.

✦ be well read about immigrant & refugee women's health and wellbeing

If you would like to be well read about immigrant and refugee women's health contact us for a mcwh publications catalogue. For research reports on a wide range of immigrant and refugee women's issues including resettlement, sexual and reproductive health, occupational health and safety, alcohol and other drugs, credit and debt issues, and diabetes prevention.

✦ access multilingual health information

Become a MCWH Member and borrow resources from the Multilingual Library. We also have a comprehensive Resource Collection if you are looking for information in your language. Over 14,000 items and 90 languages.

✦ enhance your work with immigrant & refugee women

MCWH provides cross-cultural and other specific training for employers, community workers, service providers and health professionals—we specialise in intensive training programs for bilingual community workers. MCWH will customise our training to your needs.

✦ join mcwh

If you are interested in immigrant and refugee women's health and wellbeing, become part of MCWH, contact us for a MCWH membership form.

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