

This summer, start a small social revolution

It is 10 years since the inception of 'Clockwork', a youth specific health service in Geelong (Victoria), and despite national recognition and awards for success, the service, like many other youth health programs, is still struggling for funding.

This is at a time when the health of young Australians continues to deteriorate. Youth depression has tripled in the past 30 years and about 30% of teenagers will have experienced a mental health problem before the age of 18 years.¹⁻³ One in 20 teenagers have eating disorders and one in five are obese.^{3,4} Thirty percent of teenagers drink alcohol regularly, 16% smoke regularly, and 50% of young people under 18 years have tried cannabis.^{3,5-7} Binge drinking and alcohol dependence are more common.³ The prevalence of the sexually transmitted infection chlamydia has tripled in the past 10 years.³ Most new cases of hepatitis C and HIV occur in young people.³

An underclass of young people is emerging. This group is uneducated, unemployed, has problems with tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs, and engages in very risky behaviour. If current trends continue, our children are likely to suffer more mental illness, heart disease, infertility and other chronic disease than our generation. This is the first time in recorded history that a younger generation is going backward because of preventable health trends.

There are a number of youth health programs set up in ad hoc ways by divisions of general practice and state governments across Australia, but their success is usually dependent on the support of individuals.

General practitioners provide 11 million consultations per annum for young people, and are therefore in a position to advocate for young people. Perhaps one of the most important lessons from Clockwork is the power of the GP voice. It is time to step outside our consulting rooms and to challenge our government and our communities. What we need is a small social revolution. Below are three simple strategies to consider: minister, media and mentor.⁸

Minister

Despite open acknowledgment of the importance of young people, Australia has a major national issue of uncoordinated, short term and inadequate funding for youth programs by many different government silos.

Australia needs a political vision that brings together departments of health, education, welfare and employment at all levels of government (coordination of the many existing departments with a focus on prevention). The vision needs to recognise young people as the solution, not a problem to be fixed.

Write to the Office of the Prime Minister to ask for a copy of the government's vision for young people.

Media

A recent study by the Australian Children's Foundation showed that most parents wanted more



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information about parenting teenagers, but were afraid to seek advice because of the stigma attached to seeking help. There is an enormous need for media programs on relationships, parenting and adolescent issues. The media could also be a vehicle for promoting positive images of young people and information about parenting and youth services.

Write to your television stations, radio and newspapers in support of programs about parenting, services, and positive images of young people.

Mentor

In the normal process of striving for independence, most young people experience times when they find it difficult to discuss personal issues with their parents; at this time it is important they feel connected with at least one other caring adult. When peer influence takes over family influence, a safety net is needed for the 30% of young people who struggle with mental health problems, suicidal thoughts and substance abuse.

General practitioners can encourage families to create this safety net from early childhood, before problems manifest in adolescence. They can provide resources to parents on authoritative parenting and parental and adolescent mental health.

Make yourself available as a mentor to young people and ensure your own children have trusted mentors outside of your immediate family.

There is no quick fix. Communities, parents and individuals have to regain the belief that we can influence our world. By this example, children learn to take responsibility for something bigger than themselves, to be involved in the community and to be hopeful about their future. This is what I and many other parents want to teach our children.

We need a small social revolution to demonstrate that we care. If we care about our own children, we have to care about the communities in which they live. We need to believe again in the power of our voices. **Minister, media, mentor.**

Conflict of interest: none.

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