Independent review of Stage 1 and Stage 2 hormone therapies in Queensland's public paediatrics gender services

headspace submission

Review question:
Is there anything else that you would like to raise about the current evidence base and ethical considerations for the use of Stage 1 and Stage 2 hormone treatments for children and adolescents?

headspace response:
headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, providing early intervention mental health services to 12 to 25 year olds. headspace has over 170 services across Australia, and also offers online and phone support services and digital resources through eheadspace.

As a mainstream youth mental health organisation with a large national footprint, headspace is committed to providing trans and gender diverse young people with consistent care and support in environments where they feel safe, affirmed, respected and heard.

Despite evidence that consistently highlights the important role that gender-affirming care plays in reducing mental health distress among trans and gender diverse people, trans and gender diverse people continue to experience discrimination and marginalisation in healthcare settings and the broader community. This contributes to significantly higher rates of mental illness, physical ill health, self-harm, and suicide when compared to their cisgender peers and underscores the critical need for accessible, supportive and affirming care.

In 2024–25, 514,000 services were provided via headspace centres to 96,000 young people, of whom 5 per cent identified as gender diverse. In the same year, more than 95,000 digital services were provided to more than 22,000 young people, including 8 per cent who identified as gender diverse.

The trans and gender diverse young people accessing headspace services are significantly more likely to present with psychological risk factors than their peers. A longer term deep dive into headspace data across 2019–23 shows that trans and gender diverse young people:

- are 71–80% more likely than a non-trans young person of being assessed as having suicidal thoughts or behaviour across their episode of care;
- are more likely to present at a headspace service with symptoms that meet the diagnostic threshold for a mental health disorder;
- have improved but still lower quality of life and higher psychological distress than non-LGBTIQA+ and non-trans and gender diverse young people at the end of an episode of care.

Gender-affirming care improves the mental health of transgender and gender diverse young people, and the evidence is clear that failing to provide gender-affirming care exacerbates mental ill-health among young people who are trans or gender diverse. Delayed or denied access to treatment is linked to greater likelihood of suicidality for trans and gender diverse people, compared to those whose treatment is timely and comprehensive. This demonstrates a clear need for improved access to gender-affirming healthcare and medical care, rather than pauses and uncertainty around provision of care. (1, 2)

'Gender affirming care gave me the time to live authentically as myself. To look in the mirror and make a relationship with who I see, to feel whole in who I am. That's what this care made possible. Without it, I wouldn't be here. And my parents wouldn't have their child. It gave me the chance to grow, to thrive, and to live.' Young person, headspace

Earlier access to gender-affirming care and accessing multiple types of gender-affirming interventions are both associated with positive mental health, wellbeing, and quality of life outcomes in trans and gender

headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health

diverse young people. These benefits can include reduced symptoms of mental ill health such as depression and anxiety, lower rates of self-harm and suicidality, improved self-esteem and body image, and a stronger sense of identity and belonging. This might be expressed as feeling more comfortable in their bodies, experiencing less distress, and having greater confidence, hope, and connection in daily life. Timely, comprehensive care helps support young people to thrive and participate more fully in school, family, and community life. (2)

'I want [all trans young people] to have access to timely, informed and compassionate care where their identity isn't something they have to justify or defend. No one should have to fight so hard just to be themselves.' Young person, headspace

'It takes more than individual care; it takes safe systems.' Family member, headspace

The public debate around gender affirming care is harmful to trans and gender diverse young people, and the broader LGBTIQA+ community. Staff in Queensland headspace centres have raised concern that the pause in gender affirming care and public debate over access to care is harming the LGBTIQA+ community. Concerns have been raised that the pause is exacerbating inequality, because trans young people who can access support through the private system are doing so, while those without resources are stranded with increasing mental health distress.

'We are exhausted from being debated and constantly having to adjust to rapidly shifting healthcare systems due to politics. This has an impact on our mental health, our physical bodies, and our futures as healthy adults.' Young person, headspace

References

1. GuideToProvidingGenderAffirmingCare.pdf
2. Evidence-Summary-The-association-between-gender-affirming-care-and-youth-mental-health-and-wellbeing-outcomes.pdf)