



Media Release

Understanding and treating transgender adolescents

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Leading paediatricians have spoken about the challenges faced by transgender children and adolescents and the impacts of increased awareness of gender dysphoria at the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) Congress 2015.

Paediatrician Dr Michelle Telfer leads the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne Gender Dysphoria Service.

She discussed the challenges involved in providing care to young people with gender dysphoria, including the legal barriers in Australia which restrict access to medical care.

“Adolescents can’t access cross hormone treatment if they are under the age of 18 unless they have approval from the Family Court of Australia which is very expensive, time consuming and causes distress for both the young person and their family,” Dr Telfer said.

“What is happening at the moment is that most adolescents delay starting hormone treatment until they are 18 years of age to avoid going to court.

“This has serious implications for their mental health including an increased risk of depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicide.”

Australia’s third national survey about the health and wellbeing of transgender young people found that almost half of gender questioning young people had self-harmed and that 28 per cent had attempted suicide¹.

Dr Telfer said gender dysphoria is a world-wide phenomenon that exists across cultures.

“Although the population of transgender individuals is not increasing, as society becomes more tolerant and accepting of trans people, they are feeling increasingly safe and comfortable coming forward to access treatment,” Dr Telfer said.

Dr Telfer said an increase in transgender celebrities coming out and sharing their stories are helping create further awareness of gender dysphoria.

“When you have people such as Bruce Jenner coming forward, more media attention means the longer the waiting list for our gender service gets,” Dr Telfer said.

“The rising awareness and the recognition of the transgender population in the context of equality is one of the most rapidly progressing areas of social change in our time.

“To catch up with this social progression, we must recognise the urgency to educate medical professionals, to develop and provide comprehensive medical services as well as changing the legal system to one which does not discriminate.”

The RACP has lobbied the Australian Human Rights Commission for better access to costly hormones for adolescents and gender affirmation procedures for transgender adults.

It has also lobbied for changes to the legal system which necessitate court approval for adolescents wanting to commence hormone treatment.

ⁱ Hillier, L., Jones, T., et al. (2010). *Writing Themselves In 3 (WTi3): The third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people*. Melbourne, The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University.

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