

Sexual rights: an analysis of Australian sexual health policies

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Background:

Sexual rights are human rights. Sexual rights are connected to, and distinct from reproductive rights. The World Association for Sexual Health (WAS) and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) have produced definitions of sexual and reproductive rights informed by the Universal Declaration of Sexual Rights. These rights are enforceable by the state when enshrined in social policy. Sexual health policy can promote sexual wellbeing by promoting sexual rights. Rights-informed policy is central to healthy communities.

Methods:

A content analysis of 31 sexual health policies in Australia was undertaken. Seventeen codes were developed from the WAS and IPPF rights documents. Each code was subdivided into explicit, implicit, and non-explicit non-implicit domains. The codes were mapped against the policies for analysis.

Results:

A total of 2,532 references to rights were identified. Non-explicit non-implicit codes were most frequent: equality and non-discrimination (14.7%); freedom of thought and opinion (14.3%); freedom of association (14.8%); participation in society (16.2%). “Scientific progress”, “information”, and “education” were also frequent. None of these coding references explicitly referred to rights. There were only 14 references to human rights of which nine belonged to one state (Western Australia). No sexual health policy referred to sexual rights.

Conclusion:

Our findings indicate that sexual health policies in Australia lack a sexual rights focus. Sexual rights are fundamental human rights. Australia is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The lack of reference, or inclusion to rights in sexual health policy highlights a poor recognition of the role that sexual and human rights play in wellbeing. Good policy is informed by evidence and regulatory frameworks (including human rights). A rights-based approach to sexual health policy will inform health for all. These rights must be enshrined in sexual health policy if we are to promote sexual wellbeing in Australia.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The researchers have no conflict of interest to disclose