Re: Open letter from health professionals in support of the Safe Schools Coalition Australia

We, the undersigned, are health professionals and students writing in support of the Safe Schools Coalition Australia, a program designed to create inclusive, supportive and safe education spaces for young people who identify as same sex attracted, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer or questioning (LGBTIQ+). This important work assists in mitigating the alarming 6 to 14 times higher rate of suicide among Australian LGBTIQ+ teens compared to their heterosexual peers (Dyson, et al., 2003; Rosenstreich, 2013).

Programs conducted by Safe Schools Coalition Australia are a direct response to Australian and international research which demonstrates that same-sex attracted, transgender, intersex and questioning youth experience higher levels of isolation, victimization, runaway behaviour, homelessness, domestic violence, depression, anxiety, suicide, violent victimization, substance abuse, pregnancy, and school or job failure than do heterosexual and gender conforming youth (Coker, Austin, & Schuster, 2010; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Smith, et al., 2014).

As health professionals and students, we are aware that these factors can profoundly and negatively affect mental and physical health outcomes and educational attainment for young people. However, these negative outcomes can be considerably ameliorated by caring adults and support at schools (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010).

In 2008, the Fourth National Survey of Australian Secondary Students Sexual Health, found that 9-10% of young people identified as being attracted to people of the same or both sexes (Smith, Agius, Mitchell, Barrett, & Pitts, 2009). A further national survey found 75% of same-sex attracted young people experienced some form of homophobic bullying and in 80% of cases this occurred primarily in schools (Hillier, et al., 2010).

Youth ‘12, a New Zealand based study, found four out of every hundred students identified as transgender or were unsure of their gender (Clark, et al., 2013). A national Australian
survey of the mental health and wellbeing of transgender and gender diverse young people found 61% had experienced verbal abuse and 21% physical abuse. Of those who had experienced abuse, over 80% thought of self-harm or suicide (Smith, et al., 2014). Safe Schools Coalition Australia, which has already engaged over 500 schools and 13000 educational professionals in providing psychosocial support to LGBTIQ+ youth, is an invaluable program which has the potential to mitigate some of the negative effects of homophobic and transphobic bullying and vilification.

As health professionals and students, we recognize the emergent need for such programs to not only respond to the specific needs of same sex attracted, gender diverse, intersex and questioning youth but to mitigate against victimization, violence, isolation, which can have a significant and enduring impact upon the health and wellbeing of young people.

Yours sincerely,

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Dr Cilla Haywood, Physician
Dr Petra Niclasen, Emergency Physician
Dr Andrew Buchanan, General Practitioner
Dr Julie Blake, General Practitioner
Dr Ken Lambert, General Practitioner
Dr Danielle Carter, General Practitioner
Dr Denise Fraser, General Practitioner
Dr Thanu Shekar, General Practitioner
Dr Jeff Willcox, General Practitioner
Dr Emily Farrell, General Practitioner
Dr Holly Inglis, General Practitioner
Dr Jenny Bocquet, General Practitioner
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