

Lesbian, Bisexual & Queer Women's Health Conference

VAC



2015 Report

The number and diversity of participants, and quality of the sessions at the conference was a testament to the need for this kind of event, both to showcase and discuss important issues in LBQ women's health. There are so few opportunities, and I hope that this is the beginning of a regular event.

Dr Ruth McNair, Keynote Speaker,
LBQ Women's Health Conference, 2015



Introduction

The inaugural Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Women's Health Conference hosted by VAC, in partnership with the Rainbow Network, the Australian Lesbian Medical Association and proudly supported by *beyondblue* was a flagship event building a promising foundation for future work. The conference explored best practice, research and community responses to improving the health and well being of lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) women. The primary focus of the conference was alcohol and drug use and mental health, however there were diverse themes represented, underpinning a broader public health perspective on LBQ women's health and wellbeing. The conference was completely booked out, attracted over 200 participants and maintained a significant waiting list.

The conference was an initiative of VAC's Alcohol and Other Drug Services, and was funded through the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing through the Substance Misuse Service Delivery Grants. The event met VAC AOD objectives of professional development and sector capacity building, as well as engaging with stakeholders in relation to piloting Drink Limits, a therapeutic group for lesbian, bisexual and queer women who seek support to change their alcohol use and manage their anxiety.

The aims of the conference were to drive social change and leadership, draw upon existing practice wisdom and research and to support a wide range of practitioners to reflect on their own practice in working inclusively with LBQ women. The event was MC'd by Kelly Parry.



Overview of the Event

The event was opened by Georgie Harman, CEO of *beyondblue* who spoke about *beyondblue*'s commitment to LBQ women's health, with strong messages of taking both physical and mental health care equally seriously. Simon Ruth, CEO of VAC, spoke of the history of lesbian women in the founding of VAC, and VAC's commitment to supporting the women of our community whilst honouring that VAC are not currently experts in this space and need to partner with the LBQ community. Liam Leonard, Director of Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria, presented data on the Private Lives 2 study, and noted both the poorer self reported mental health outcomes for LBQ women against the national average, as well as the importance of community connection.

Dr Ruth McNair presented a keynote plenary presentation on the ALICE study: "Alcohol and Lesbian/Bisexual women: Insights into Culture and Emotions". Dr McNair's presentation focused on the prevalence of alcohol use among lesbian and bisexual women, finding that whilst the drinking culture in lesbian, bisexual and queer women's communities is similar to the general population, barriers to accessing services are significant. Dr McNair reported that almost 25% of same sex attracted women had experienced discrimination within health care.

A plenary panel session consisting of Tarnia Thompson from QLife, Nadia Gavin from Harm Reduction Victoria, Ren Greyson from YSAS, and Wendy Brokenshire from VAC Counselling, Alcohol and Drug Services explored a case study of a young woman seeking support for her alcohol and methamphetamine use. The panel drew on their practice wisdom and knowledge of service networks to identify a holistic range of considerations and potential support options, both peer and professional.





Workshops

Workshops held in the afternoon explored a breadth of topics from inclusive practice to community experiences, and were conducted by a range of professional experts and community leaders in this field.

Stream 1: Affirming the Lived Experiences of LBQ Women

The stream profiled current research around LBQ women's use of alcohol and other drugs. Julie Mooney-Somers discussed the SWASH study, and identified that whilst younger LBQ women were drinking less than their older counterparts, 82% of women were exceeding the NHMRC risky drinking guidelines. Samar Haidar from ACON explored the use of tobacco and the challenges in reaching LBQ women through traditional smoking cessation campaigns. Amanda Roxburgh from NDARC discussed that LBQ young women were likely to begin risky alcohol use at a younger age than their heterosexual peers, with an average age of 15.5, as opposed to 17.7.

Stream 2: Building Healthy Communities

The stream began with Paula Westhead from Emerge who identified similar domestic violence rates in heterosexual and same sex relationships, whilst there are tactics which can be specific to LBQ relationships; such as the threat of outing. Karen Field of Drummond Street Services articulated the difference between services being 'happy to see' LGBTI clients, and being able to provide a culturally sensitive service. Julie Mooney-Somers gave an overview of research relating to LBQ Women and pap smears, which found screening was at a similar rate to heterosexual women, although questioned whether LBQ women who were told in previous decades that they did not need pap smear tests because of their sexuality, have since been informed that this view has shifted.

Stream 3: Inclusive Practice

This session heard from Jax Jacki Brown who focused on the intersections between queer identities and disability, and the need for inclusive service practices to be led by women with this lived experience. Emma Woods facilitated discussion around experiences of doing LGBTIQ work professionally, as a queer woman, and the challenges and complexities of being visible in this way. Brenda Appleton from Transgender Victoria presented on their work in the aged care sector and the training the LGBTI inclusive training they deliver to aged care service providers.

Stream 4: Community Led Action & Change

This session highlighted the strength in community led projects. Mary Matthews talked to her work around supporting women over 25 through the coming out process of being lesbian, bisexual or queer, and what particular challenges can be involved for this cohort. Shane Hernan from YUMCHA in Warrnambool, provided a snapshot of the work happening in their region, and the challenges of providing peer support in a region where young people are often 'put on a train' to the city to access a greater range of services. Sally Goldner from Bi-Alliance Victoria spoke to the experiences of bisexual people and facilitated a rich discussion about the barriers and lack of research on the B's in LGBTIQ.

Evaluation

Participants were invited to provide feedback on their experience of the conference by a final reflection discussion, through a post-conference email and through evaluation forms. Participants rated their overall satisfaction with the conference as 8.8/10. The quality/relevance of the panel was rated 8.3/10; session presenters were rated 8.9/10. The length of the conference achieved 8.1/10 - the lowest score, with all comments relating to length, stating they would have liked the conference to go for longer. The convenience of location was rated at 9.2/10 and communication prior to the event 8.5/10.

Networking was identified by the majority of participants as the highlight of the conference, followed by learning new information about lesbian, bisexual and queer women's health and wellbeing. When asked to identify what they might implement from the conference into their workplace, participants identified sharing knowledge with colleagues; looking at the Rainbow Tick and culturally sensitive practice; and using inclusive language in their workplace. In response to feedback for future conferences, nearly a quarter suggested increasing the length of the conference. Several participants identified that there were no changes they would recommend.



Recommendations

1. To repeat the event annually with a national focus, including regional and rural areas.
2. To include a focus on policy and advocacy.
3. Partner with other LGBTIQ organisations within Australia such as ACON and other possible partners. Continue working with *beyondblue* and key LBQ women's organisations and community leaders.
4. To continue with a low cost/free ticket schedule for accessibility and seek additional funding partners to maintain this objective.
5. Extend the length of the conference if within budget.

Next steps

Schedule the 2016 LBQ Women's Health Conference, to be held Friday 18th March.

Explore official partnerships with *beyondblue*, ACON and GLHV.

Plan for 2017 conference to be held in Sydney.

Seek funding and grant opportunities to support future conferences.

SAVE THE DATE

Next LBQWH Conference:
FRIDAY 18TH MARCH 2016
to be held in Melbourne.

Email VAC to register your interest
events@vac.org.au



ALCOHOL & ANXIETY GOT YOU FEELING TRAPPED?

Talk in a supported place about relationships, anxiety and alcohol use.

Drink Limits is a free eight week group for lesbian, bisexual and queer women to meet and explore these issues.

Drink Limits is a free, confidential and non judgemental therapeutic group program exploring the role alcohol use plays in our lives and communities.

The group will focus on when and why we drink, as well as exploring strategies to manage this use.

This small group will be held at

cohealth
365 Hoddle Street
Collingwood



Drink Limits

For more information or to register interest, please contact VAC on 03 9865 6700



If you are a LBQ woman who wants support to change your alcohol use, then contact VAC on 03 9865 6700 to register interest for the next Drink Limits group starting in September.

