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AMA submission to Environment and Communications References Committee - Inquiry into the Harm Being Done to Australian Children through Access to Pornography on the Internet

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The Australian Medical Association (AMA) is the peak medical organisation in Australia representing doctors across all specialties of medicine. The AMA's policies on public health issues are evidence-based and reflect considered medical opinion and are respected by the community, politicians and the media.

The AMA is thankful for the opportunity to provide a brief submission in relation to the harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet. This inquiry will be valuable not just for government, but also for parents, educators and health professionals.

Doctors are a group of professionals who care for children. As an organisation that represents the interests of medical professionals, and advocates for improved health in the broader community, the AMA is committed to promoting and ensuring the health and safety of children and young people in Australia.

The AMA has previously provided evidence to the *Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment* (2008), where we noted the growing concern in relation to the increasing sexualisation of children and its impact. The AMA provided a submission to that inquiry pointing out the emerging evidence about children being influenced by the media.

Australian children are now highly likely to be exposed to online technology from a very young age, and it is now a reality that children and young people are increasingly coming into contact with internet content designed for adults. As a result, children and young people are being exposed to a vast range of pornography which is readily available on the internet.

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Many of these adult internet websites feature what can only be termed ‘extreme’ material, which to a young and vulnerable person without an understanding of sex education, could be quite damaging.

Because of the proliferation of online pornography, it is increasingly playing a role in shaping social norms in relation to sexuality, in particular among young people. The AMA believes that children viewing highly sexualised pornographic material are at risk of negatively affecting their psychological development and mental health by potentially skewing their views of normality and acceptable behaviour at a critical time of development in their life.

Internet pornography is reported to depict sexual relationships and activities that are violent or aggressive towards women, or portray women in such a way that young viewers could form unrealistic understandings of sexual and social behaviour. It is also well established that men (and boys) are the largest viewers of internet pornography.

A recent article, ‘How pornography influences and harms sexual behaviour’ (27/01/2015) noted the impact of internet pornography on young men:

“...the average age of first exposure to pornography is around 12 years of age and the pornography that is the cheapest and easiest to access contains very high rates of violence against women and promotes a degrading and dehumanizing form of sexuality for boys. Boys and men are the majority of consumers of such pornography, making it the dominant sexual framework to which boys are socialized and to which girls, as sexual partners, must respond. Therefore, discussions, both in high school and colleges, about sexual health and healthy relationships should include a dialogue about the consumption and use of pornography.”
(<http://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-01-pornography-sexual-behavior.html>)

The AMA’s submission to the *Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment* cited an Australian Study of Health and Relationships report, which found that the age of first sexual experience has fallen progressively. Early first intercourse correlates with a number of negative consequences that may include teenage pregnancy, increased number of life partners and increased risk of sexually transmitted infection.

Evidence indicates that exposure to and consumption of internet pornography is strongly associated with risky behaviour among adolescents. The AMA is also aware of a range of studies that demonstrate a strong link between internet exposure to sexually explicit material and earlier and more diverse sexual practice that can result in adverse sexual and mental health outcomes.

This growing body of research shows that premature exposure to sexualised images and adult sexual content has a negative impact on the psychological development of children, particularly on self-esteem, body image and understandings of sexuality and relationships. Exposure to sexualised imagery has been fuelled by the proliferation of online pornography and sexualised representations of children in advertising, in addition to the circulation of sexualised content through social media.

Furthermore, over the past decade, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of men and women undertaking genital cosmetic surgery, both in Australia and worldwide. These surgical procedures are marketed as ways to enhance sexual attractiveness and/or gratification. The growth in demand for such procedures has also been linked to idealised and highly selective

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images of male and, in particular, female genital anatomy that have proliferated through online pornography.

The AMA supports technologies such as internet software that allow parents to block access to certain websites or types of content, however we acknowledge that measures to ‘filter’ the internet have proved problematic and difficult to regulate.

Greater education about how to safely navigate the internet and how to help children and young people recognise the content they are accessing is important.

The AMA supports interventions to prevent the further proliferation of sexualised images to children.

The AMA recognises that adults are free to view non-violent adult erotica, however we believe that there are serious health and social problems when children and young people are exposed to internet pornography. The AMA will continue to advocate around ensuring the online health and safety of children and young people in Australia.

If there are any queries about this submission or if further information is required, please contact Simon Tatz, Manager Public Health

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