National Reproductive and Sexual Health Research Forum
30 May 2014 – Summary Report

Context, funding and management of the Forum

Family Planning NSW (FPNSW), in collaboration with Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia (SH&FPA), has been commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Health to build and consolidate alliances with reproductive and sexual health researchers through holding two national research forums with associated preparation and follow up activities.

The purpose of these forums is to bring together lead researchers, reproductive and sexual health stakeholder organisations, health services and consumers to identify current gaps in reproductive and sexual health research and propose strategies to address these gaps.

To assist both in preparing for the forums and developing a national reproductive and sexual health strategy, FPNSW convened the National Sexual and Reproductive Health Research Steering Committee (Appendix 1). The Committee members are each nationally and internationally respected researchers in the field of reproductive and sexual health. It is expected that the Committee members will serve for approximately 2 years. Their commitment and willingness to give of their time and expertise is greatly appreciated.

It was agreed that the first forum in May 2014 would focus on reproductive health research with the follow up forum being primarily focussed on sexual health research. The May 2014 Forum built upon the work of SH&FPA research roundtable held in late 2012. Thirty two (32) individuals attended the May 2014 Forum including lead researchers, research organisations, health services, family planning organisations, Universities and policy makers.

Forum Objectives

The purpose of the forum was to:

- Strengthen research in reproductive and sexual health through bringing together key stakeholder from across the nation
- Identify gaps in reproductive and sexual health research;
- Propose research priorities and strategies to address identified gaps in sexual and reproductive health.

The Forum did not focus on developing specific research projects but on creating a consensus-driven national research priority framework to guide and encourage the reproductive and
sexual health sector, researchers and research funding organisations in developing and facilitating more high quality, targeted research.

**Preparation**

In preparation for the Forum the following steps were undertaken:

- The formation of a National Sexual and Reproductive Health Research Steering Committee. The Committee met via teleconference two times in the lead up to the Forum to review the agenda and Forum process and to agree the desired outcomes.
- The engagement of an independent consultant with expertise in research strategy formation to support FPNSW staff and the Steering Committee as well as to facilitate the Forum. The consultant also interviewed each Steering Committee member to ascertain their views.
- Professor Elizabeth Sullivan, the Steering Committee Chair, conducted formal consultations with State Family Planning Organisations in the lead up to the Forum in which she sought their views on research priorities, processes and engagement.
- FPNSW also provided Forum attendees with a summary of a recently completed national report, “Reproductive and Sexual Health in Australia”. The report provides a comprehensive review of issues in relation to seven domains of reproductive and sexual health; fertility; infertility and assisted reproductive technology; infant mortality; contraception; induced abortion; sexually transmitted infections; and cancer of the reproductive tract. The report also reviews pregnancy counselling in Australia and outlines services delivered by Australian Family Planning Organisations. All Forum attendees were provided with a free hard copy of the report.
- In addition, Professor Mary O’Kane, NSW Chief Scientist, accepted an invitation to attend the Forum and launch the report.
Organisation of the Forum sessions

Attendees were initially grouped at tables each of which brought together researchers, Non-Government Organisations (NGO) and reproductive and sexual health providers. The Forum itself featured the following sessions:

- Overview of the Forum and launch of “Reproductive and Sexual Health in Australia” by Professor Mary O’Kane
- An environmental scan of the policy context for reproductive and sexual health research
Discussion and drafting of research priorities
Action planning and follow up steps

Draft Priorities

The outputs of several small group and open forum sessions saw the framing of four broad, national research priorities for reproductive health. In addition, two enabling priorities were identified. An overall vision or strategic goal for the research program was also drafted.

Vision/strategic goal

“Our vision is that all pregnancies in Australia are timely, healthy, safe and intended.”

Draft Research priorities

1. Health economics of reproductive health
2. Unintended pregnancy
3. Reproductive health needs of specific populations
4. National reproductive and sexual health workforce

Draft enabling priorities

5. National (and international) data sets
6. Research synthesis, dissemination and translation

Detailed Overview

1. Health economics of reproductive health

It was noted that the primary health sector often does not position itself effectively in regard to understanding and explaining to governments and policy makers the economic costs/benefit of various alternate approaches to health and related issues. This includes, of course, the cost of inaction, perverse incentives, low levels of consumer knowledge and awareness and ineffective strategies/treatments.

For example, not enough is known about the economic costs of unintended pregnancy. We need to know the 10 year or lifetime cost of unintended pregnancy versus how much it costs to prevent a pregnancy in terms of education, counselling, service provision and training of the workforce. The cost-benefit of maintaining an effective reproductive and sexual health workforce to educate the community also needs to be defined. The same rationale applies to infertility and the low level of knowledge men and women have of their own fertility.

NB: It is envisaged that the approach to addressing the final agreed research priorities will be:
- Multidisciplinary
- Co-ordinated nationally and internationally
- Collaborative; and:
  - Engage consumers
Several participants noted the leadership of the Guttmacher Institute and suggested a possible alliance to learn from their methodology, advocacy, research and policies.

**Research issues to be addressed**

- Socio-economic cost of unintended pregnancy
- Socio-economic cost of infertility
- Taking a collaborative approach to engaging with health economists and other experts in framing research projects and research questions
- Access and equity – including access to education and termination services; perverse incentives such as co-payments
- Cost-benefit of health promotion and education in regard to contraception and fertility

2. **Unintended pregnancy**

Forum attendees noted the ongoing societal and government challenges in addressing this issue and in particular, matters around research on abortion and access to abortion services and the need for national datasets on both abortion and contraception.

It is important to note, however, that the uptake of Long Acting Reversible Contraception (LARC) in Australia is relatively low. Little is known about the barriers to (LARC) uptake in regard to both clinicians and the community. A positive approach emphasising a wellness, empowered approach to conception and contraception was emphasised.

**Research issues to be addressed**

- National datasets on abortion and contraception
- Legal harmonisation across states and territories
- LARC uptake and barriers; modelling of LARC uptake
- Issues in abortion referral
- Understanding male needs and attitudes to both contraception and fertility

3. **Needs of specific populations**

The framing of this broad priority reflects the fact that there are a range of reproductive and sexual health needs across Australia that reflect, in turn, ethnic, geographical, educational, gender orientation, age and disability diversity. In particular, the specific needs of young and indigenous populations were highlighted. In and of themselves, the research issues of particular populations may not be a national priority, but it is a national priority to ensure research is conducted as appropriate to the diversity of the population at large.

**Research issues to be addressed**

- Teenage fertility
- Uptake of social media and on-line promotion campaigns
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander reproductive and sexual health
• Male attitudes and engagement
• Older populations
• Disabled persons
• Rural and regional education, service, and access issues
• CALD and refugees populations: barriers to access, needs etc.

4. Workforce
The nature, skillsets and professional education of the primary care workforce that underpins the delivery of high quality, sustainable reproductive and sexual health services, education and training in and of itself requires research. The Workforce priority encompasses a range of complex issues from the University-level curriculum for clinician education (doctors, nurses, social workers, etc.), to the health literacy of the workforce, models of community education and specialist versus generalist philosophies of service delivery. Workforce also interacts with the economics and cost-benefit analyses outlined in Priority 1. Choices made around workforce and models of delivery will have direct and long term impact on cost and sustainability.

Research issues to be addressed
• Workforce skills and literacy in reproductive and sexual health
• Distribution versus need
• Social media and on-line consumer and clinician education and training
• University curricula
• Ongoing clinician education/professional development (FACGP; RANZCOG, Nursing Association, etc.)
• Generalist versus specialist models of care
• Medicare rebates and engagement of the nursing workforce

5. National datasets
Although not a research issue itself, the availability of necessary data sets on abortion and contraception and a “single entry gate” to Family Planning Organisation data are key research enabling issues. In addition, it was thought important to compare cross-national and international datasets where appropriate and productive. The framing of a long term, national approach to data sets and data access is considered to be an important challenge that must be addressed in addressing the research priorities once agreed.

6. Research synthesis, dissemination and translation
There were substantive but not universal views that work remains to be done to assemble and disseminate past research findings and learning. Related to this challenge is the need for the reproductive and health sector to continuously translate relevant research findings into clinical practice, policy formation, education programs and professional curricula.
These questions and challenges are not unique to the reproductive and sexual health sector although the framing and implementation of sustainable and effective solutions will no doubt reflect the unique challenges and opportunities the sector faces. More consultation of the issues surrounding this priority will be essential prior to any concerted action.

**Next Steps**

The final session of the Forum commenced the process of framing “Action Plans” around draft priorities 1 to 4. The intent over the coming months is to develop agreed actions plans and strategies for each of the research priority areas, once they are agreed. The goal being to provide a pragmatic and easy to use framework to lobby for sequestered research funds and to assist researchers and stakeholders in formulating specific research projects for funding.

Specific follow up steps include:

- Making available a soft copy of “Reproductive and Sexual Health Australia” to Forum participants (already completed)
- Expanding the Steering Committee with a view to further developing the research priorities in consultation with stakeholders
- Developing short action plans around key priorities including ensuring adequate support to continue the momentum gained thus far
- Engaging researchers in formulating research questions and projects
- Engaging key health service and policy bodies around the final national priorities
- Liaising internationally, for example, with the Guttmacher Institute
- Commencing planning for the follow up national research Forum on Sexual Health which in itself will be used to continue the momentum generated by this, the first Forum

**Acknowledgement of industry partners**

- Merck Sharp & Dohme (Australia) Pty Limited
- Bayer Australia
# Appendix 1

Members of the National Reproductive and Sexual Health Research Forum Steering Committee

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr Caroline De Costa</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and Director of the Clinical School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor Basil Donovan</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Research Head, Sexual Health Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Jane Estoesta</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Director of Monitoring, Evaluation, Research &amp; Operations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor Jayne Lucke</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Director</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Ea Mulligan</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Head of Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Elizabeth Sullivan</td>
<td>Chair</td>
<td>Head of Research, Associate Dean Research</td>
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### Appendix 2

#### Strategy and Planning Day Attendees

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professor Kirsten Black</td>
<td>Joint Head of Discipline of Obstetrics, Gynaecology &amp; Neonatology</td>
<td>Central Clinical School, University of Sydney</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Ann Brassil</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>Family Planning NSW</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Jill Davidson</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>Sexual Health Information Networking and Education SA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor Basil Donovan</td>
<td>Research Head, Sexual Health Program</td>
<td>The Kirby Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs Wendy Downs</td>
<td>Rural Health Continuing Education Program Manager</td>
<td>Rural Health Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Nicole Ekert</td>
<td>Communications Manager</td>
<td>Marie Stopes International</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Jane Estoesta</td>
<td>Director of Monitoring, Evaluation, Research &amp; Operations</td>
<td>Family Planning NSW</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor Jane Fisher</td>
<td>Jean Hailes Professor of Women’s Health and Director Jean Hailes Research Unit</td>
<td>Jean Hailes Research Unit, Monash University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Julie Hamblin</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>HWL Ebsworth Lawyers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Kenneth Hargreaves</td>
<td>Associate Medical Director</td>
<td>Merck Sharp &amp; Dohme (Australia) Pty Ltd</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Caroline Harvey</td>
<td>Medical Educator</td>
<td>The Institute for Urban Indigenous Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Jane Hocking</td>
<td>Deputy Director</td>
<td>Centre for Women's Health, Gender and Society, University of Melbourne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Karen Howard</td>
<td>Senior Brands Manager</td>
<td>Merck Sharp &amp; Dohme (Australia) Pty Ltd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Louise Johnson</td>
<td>Co-convener</td>
<td>Public Health Association Australia Pty Ltd</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Lynne Jordan</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>Family Planning Victoria</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor John Kaldor</td>
<td>Professor and Program Head</td>
<td>The Kirby Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Megan Lim</td>
<td>Head of Sexual Health Research Group</td>
<td>The Burnet Institute</td>
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<td>Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor Jayne Lucke</td>
<td>Director</td>
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<td>Mr Alistair Macdonald</td>
<td>Manager, Clinical Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Jodi McKay</td>
<td>Director, Communications, Government and Community Affairs</td>
<td>Family Planning NSW</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Kathryn Ogden</td>
<td>Medical Officer</td>
<td>Family Planning Tasmania</td>
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<td>Dr Janette Perz</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
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<td>Mr Phillip Pogson</td>
<td>External Facilitator</td>
<td>The Leading Partnership</td>
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<td>Dr Penelope Steele</td>
<td>Medical Director</td>
<td>Family Planning &amp; Welfare NT</td>
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<td>Dr Mary Stewart</td>
<td>Medical Education Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor Elizabeth Sullivan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Angela Taft</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Donna Tilley</td>
<td>Clinical Nurse Consultant Sexual Health and Women's Health and President of Australasian Sexual Health &amp; HIV Nurses Association Inc.</td>
<td>Australasian Sexual Health &amp; HIV Nurses Association Inc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor Jane Ussher</td>
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<td>Dr Edith Weisberg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Henrietta Williams</td>
<td>Sexual Health Physician</td>
<td>Melbourne Sexual Health Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Amy Zhong</td>
<td>Projects Officer</td>
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