



In sickness and in health

How marriage equality means a healthier community

What has health got to do with marriage equality?

The health of gay and lesbian Australians is negatively affected by the discrimination and prejudice they experience.

Because marriage is a key legal and social institution, excluding gays and lesbians from marriage has a particularly bad impact on their health outcomes.

Allowing same-sex couples to marry will have a profound and positive impact on the health of gay and lesbian Australians and their families.

The health costs of discrimination

A large and respected body of Australian social research shows the vulnerability of same-sex attracted people to prejudice, discrimination and violence.¹

Due to this prejudice and discrimination gay and lesbian Australians are more likely to experience below-average health outcomes including higher levels of depression due to this prejudice and discrimination.²

The statistics are particularly alarming for younger and newly-identifying LGBTI people, who have consistently higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, early school leaving, conflict with peers and parents and suicide ideation, all directly related to the discrimination and prejudice they experience.³

This has led Australia's LGBTI Health Alliance to endorse marriage equality as an important way to improve the health of LGBTI people.⁴

It is also why the Australian Medical Association has a policy about the adverse health impacts of discrimination against LGBTI people.⁵

The health benefits of marriage

There is also a growing body of research showing that married partners, including same-sex married partners, are, on average, healthier, happier and longer lived than their cohabiting peers, or singles.

According to the US Centre for Disease Control, even rates of heart disease, drug use and stress are lower among married partners. The US Department of Health and Human Services agrees that married people are generally healthier than other people.⁶

In a wide-ranging review of studies into same-sex couples who marry, Yale Law Professor William Eskridge and his colleague Darren Spedale identified specific health benefits for these couples, from the lower levels of stress associated with being more open with family and work colleagues to lower levels of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).⁷

Better health and marriage equality

Major studies show a direct link between these high levels of discrimination, poor health outcomes and exclusion from marriage.

A large-scale US study by Herdt et al in 2006 found laws that prevent same-sex couples from marrying cause the couples to devalue their relationships, feel discriminated against, and experience high levels of stress and other mental health problems, regardless of whether the couples in question wish to marry.⁸ The study attributes this to the negative effects of discrimination in a central social institution.

After reviewing research from around the world, King et al in 2006 found that legal recognition of same-sex couples reduces discrimination, increases the stability of same-sex relationships, and leads to better physical and mental health for gay and lesbian people.⁹

"For GLBTI individuals, discrimination can lead to a poorer general health status."

Australian Medical Association

"I see clients whose mental health issues are directly related to discrimination. Same-sex attracted young people are particularly sensitive to messages that their relationships are not equal to other relationships."

Paul Martin, MAPS, Qld psychologist

Legal inequality and poorer health

For same-sex attracted people, legal inequality leads to higher rates of:

- depression
- suicide ideation
- hate crime
- drug/alcohol abuse
- anxiety
- HIV/AIDS, other STIs

Inclusion, belonging

Arguably the most important link between marriage equality and health is the way marriage affirms relationships, strengthens family bonds and creates a sense of inclusion.

Landmark research in the US and Europe led by Professor Lee Badgett identifies some of these benefits of marriage equality to same-sex couples and their families. She found that same-sex partners overwhelmingly:

- felt marriage had increased their commitment and their sense of responsibility, and had generally strengthened their relationships
- believed their children were better off after their marriage, chiefly through legal protection for those children and enhanced feelings of security, stability and acceptance in the children, and
- felt participation and acceptance in their extended families and communities had increased because of their marriage.

Answering the critics

Some opponents of marriage equality believe the affirmation of same-sex relationships is a threat to public health because of higher rates of HIV/AIDS among some gay men.

There is no evidence that numbers of same-sex attracted people, or rates of STIs, have increased where same-sex couples have been allowed to marry. All the evidence points to a decrease in such diseases.

This should not come as a surprise, given that marriage equality is about legally affirming monogamous, life-long same-sex unions.