

**Inquiry into Women’s Pain**

Inquiry Terms of Reference

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# Context

It is well established that women and men experience pain differently and respond differently to pharmacological and non-pharmacological pain interventions. Chronic pain affects a higher proportion of girls and women than men around the world; however, women are less likely to receive treatment. Research has also shown that women generally experience more recurrent pain, more severe pain, and longer lasting pain than men. Moreover, there are types of pain that impact women disproportionately, such as musculoskeletal, abdominal, head and neck pain. Persistent pelvic pain is another condition and is estimated to affect between 15 and 25% of women and is rarely spoken about. It is estimated that pelvic pain costs Australians more than $6 billion annually in direct costs.

Women face real and enduring challenges when seeking care and support for pain. At nearly every level of healthcare, men's health claims are treated as the default. In comparison, girls and women’s claims are often viewed as a-typical, exaggerated, and even completely fabricated. Women are adversely impacted as they lose time, money, and their lives trying to navigate a healthcare system designed for and around men. Medical gender bias routinely leads to a denial of pain and therefore pain relief and associated treatment for female patients. This occurs for a range of health conditions including cardiovascular, neurological, reproductive, and autoimmune conditions.

It is important that as a state we understand what best care is for girls and women by hearing and acknowledging what their views and experiences are and learning from exemplar clinical practice. In 2023-24, the Victorian Government committed $159.3 million as part of the Women’s Health Reform Program to change the way women’s health issues are treated and includes an inquiry into women’s pain. Established in September 2023, the Victorian Women's Health Advisory Council will provide independent expert advice to government on implementation of the program. The Council will be supported by the Inquiry into Women’s Pain Sub-Committee that will guide delivery of the Inquiry into Women’s Pain, led by Safer Care Victoria.

# Purpose

To conduct an inquiry into women’s pain in Victoria that will provide an opportunity for the experiences of girls and women to be heard and acknowledged. The inquiry will report on these experiences and ensure that they inform the inquiry’s understanding of systemic issues and solutions that will form the basis for improved patient care.

# Scope

The Inquiry will report on Victorian girls and women from 12 years of age with living and lived experience of pain and consider opportunities to improve access to treatment and care.

It will:

1. provide an opportunity for girls and women from across our community to share their experiences of pain and pain management in their own words, and for these experiences to be heard and acknowledged.
2. listen to the experience of girls, women and clinicians to identify the barriers and enablers when accessing care, treatment and services for pain conditions.
3. describe the impact of the current service delivery system on care for pain conditions.
4. identify opportunities to improve the care, treatment and services for pain conditions.
5. consider appropriate models of care, service delivery frameworks, workforce skill mix, and other areas requiring change.
6. translate research and evidence-based interventions that address unwarranted sex and gender variations and improve the equity of outcomes relating to the access and efficacy of pain management.

The Inquiry will explore the areas above by:

* applying an intersectional lens when listening to, and acknowledging individual’s experiences of pain, including those living with chronic and persistent conditions, such as endometriosis, migraine, fibromyalgia, and other types of pain.
* consulting with clinicians, service organisations and stakeholders involved in the care, detection, diagnostics, treatment, and support of those living with pain conditions.

This process will be facilitated through:

* submissions from community and sector stakeholders
* survey of girls and women with lived experience and healthcare workers
* community consultations with girls, women, healthcare workers and key stakeholders.

The Sub-Committee will deliver a final report of the Inquiry into Women’s Pain to the Victorian Women’s Health Advisory Council by December 2024. The Inquiry report will include recommendations to inform improved models of care and service delivery for Victorian girls and women experiencing pain in the future.

The Terms of Reference was last reviewed in January 2024.