

7 June 2017

Ciara Lee
Clerk of the Committee
Government Administration Committee
Bowen House
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON

Petition 2014/0119 of Bob McCroskie and 22,234 others

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the petition which requests:

“That an expert panel be appointed to investigate the public health effects and societal harms of pornography to both children and adults, and to make policy recommendations to parliament”.

You have requested that the Ministry of Health makes a written response to two questions, firstly:

Has the Ministry of Health undertaken any research in the area of the public health effects and societal harms of pornography? If so what is the name of the research and is it publically available?

The Ministry of Health has not undertaken research in the area of pornography. However in partnership with ACC it has submitted a research proposal for the consideration of the cross government Sexual Violence Prevention Advisory Board which is a part of the cross government Family and Sexual Violence programme.

The proposed research would cover the scope and amount of pornography usage by NZ young people; issues encountered by schools, young people, offender treatment services, sexual health providers, government agencies; actions to prevent harms from pornography undertaken internationally.

Your second question was:

Is the Ministry aware of the existence of any additional research done outside of the Ministry in the area of public health effects and societal harms of pornography?

Ministry officials undertook an informal scan of the literature on the impact of pornography on children and young people’s sexual development, attitudes and behaviours as part of the development of a new Sexual and Reproductive Health Plan.

The Sexual and Reproductive Health Plan is in draft and has not yet been submitted or approved by the Minister of Health.

The literature scan had two main findings. Firstly that pornography is a common part of young people’s lives. Australian research found that 28% of children have viewed pornography by age 11, increasing to 93% of boys and 62% of girls by age 16. Most

children and young people have internet access to free pornography and first exposures are often accidental although boys will then intentionally seek further pornography.

Secondly, that the content of pornography has changed significantly over the last 20 years and has become more extreme, deviant and violent. Violence towards women and girls is depicted in 80 percent of online content. This has a variety of harmful impacts on children and young people's sexual expectations, attitudes, and behaviour. European research showed an association between regular viewing of pornography and initiation of sexual violence. An overview of findings is included as an addendum to this letter.

The Government Administration Committee may also be interested in work done by other governments. The Ministry is aware of initiatives in the UK and Australia to consider the harmful effects of pornography. The UK Children's Commissioner conducted "A Rapid Evidence Assessment on the Effect that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People" entitled "Basically Porn is Everywhere". The Australian Senate has just completed and reported back on an enquiry into 'Harm Being Done to Children through Internet Exposure to Pornography'.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'KB', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Keriana Brooking
**Acting Director – Service Commissioning
Ministry of Health**

ADDENDUM

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS FROM LITERATURE SCAN ON PORNOGRAPHY.

Children and Young People's Access to Pornography

1. Based on the Ministry's scan of the literature the evidence currently suggested the following. Wide access to personal, portable and private internet capable devices mean that the majority of today's young people are exposed to or are accessing online pornography that is designed for adult audiences. First exposure is often accidental and increasingly at a younger age due to:
 - online popups, social media and web name links used by pornography sites close in spelling to websites children might access
 - a lack of barriers to access, such as cost, privacy, monitoring and regulation
 - the proliferation of global pornography sites
 - social acceptability - young people often view pornography with friends, on smartphones, and there is pressure to watch from their peers.

2. Research shows different rates of exposure with a trend towards higher rates of exposure for young people. Australian research shows pornography is viewed by:
 - 28% of children by age 11
 - 93% of 13-16 year old boys and 62% of 13-16 year old girls.
 - A pan-European study found that 39-59% of 13-17 year old boys consumed pornography regularly. The study found that regular pornography use was positively associated with instigating sexual violence
 - The NZ Youth 2012 data showed a positive association between instigating sexual violence and viewing pornography (although reliability is in question as the numbers were small).

Impacts of pornography

3. Pornography has grown to be an estimated 25 billion dollar industry. What used to be termed 'hard-core' pornography - more extreme, violent deviant and interactive forms of pornography - is now normative including:
 - Physical aggression towards women is present in over 80% of online pornography videos.
 - Distorted reality, for example, aggression is overwhelmingly met with pleasure or indifference from the recipient.
 - Extreme and deviant sexual acts likely to result in pain, physical harm, humiliation, or fear.

4. The evidence found in the literature reviewed by the Ministry found that the amount of pornography viewed by many young people often well prior to their becoming sexually active means that children and young people are learning about sex through watching pornography. The literature outlined a variety of impacts including:
 - unhealthy perspectives on consent, coercion, sexual equality
 - negative self- body image
 - normalising sexually aggression paradigms, negative views of women, entitlement to sex and female submission (as displayed in the Roastbusters case)
 - sexual preoccupation and earlier sexual experimentation
 - aggressive or violent sexual behaviour
 - pornography 'addiction' and compulsive sexual behaviour.

5. This literature is contested by some academics and activists who contend that pornography is a positive way to embrace human sexuality and allow non-heterosexual young people to learn about and validate their sexuality.
6. Finally, the eminent Australian gender and violence researcher Associate Professor Michael Flood noted that “simplistic deterministic claims about the effects of viewing pornography were unhelpful as these vary depending on the amount, and nature of pornography used, and characteristics of the viewer. A broader focus on social and public health effects of pornography would be more useful.