

# Addressing health inequities for same sex attracted women in New South Wales, Australia, who use drugs

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## Introduction

ACON's Alcohol and Other Drugs Program provides a Needle Syringe Program, peer-based harm reduction programs, drug education targeted at members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, and counselling services. The Lesbian Health Project works with lesbians and other same-sex attracted (SSA) women to improve their health and wellbeing through health promotion, peer education and community development programs as well as providing capacity development for mainstream service providers.

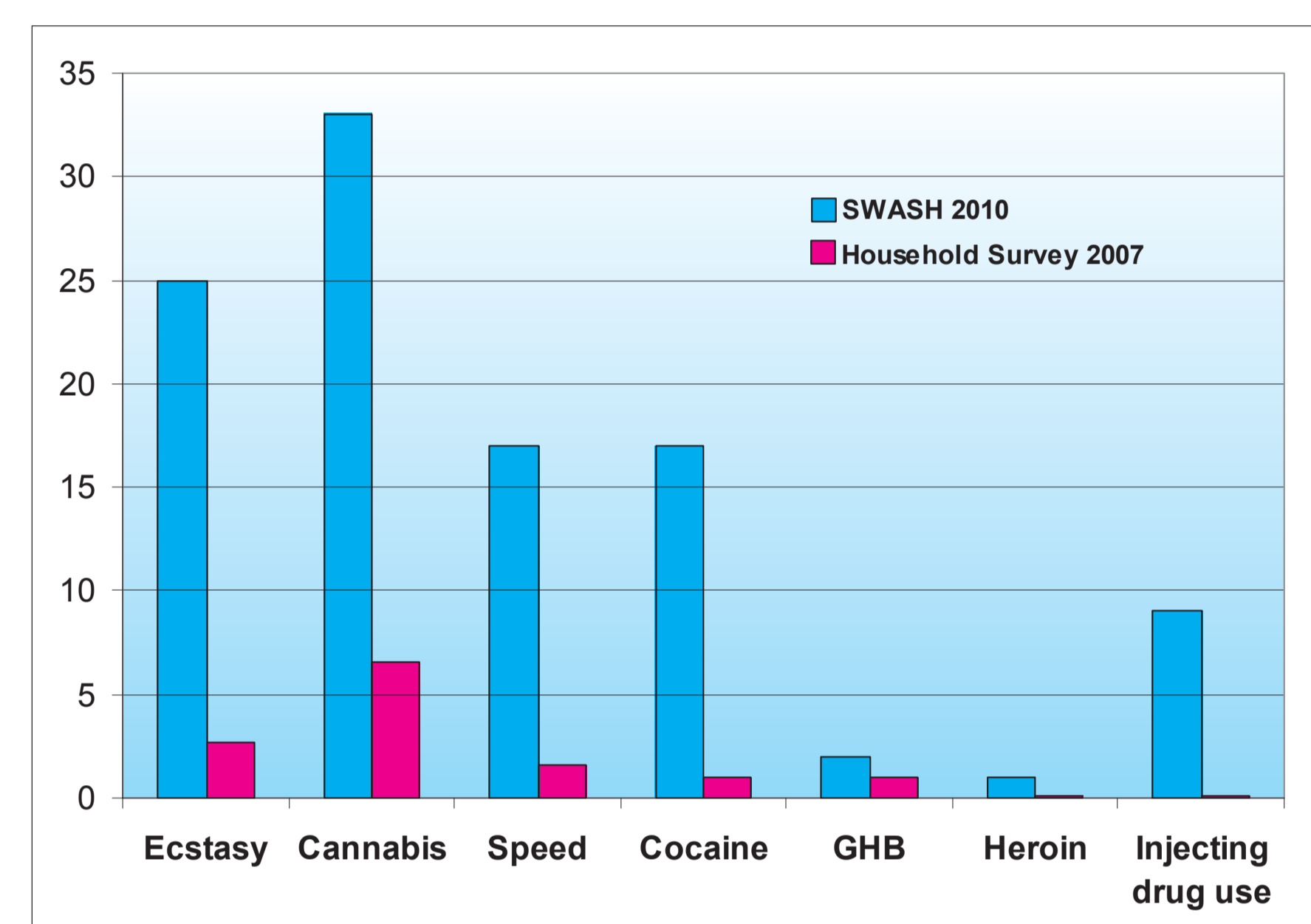
In Australia, LGBT people have considerably higher rates of drug use than the general population. While there is considerable funding support from Australian state and federal governments for education interventions that address gay men's drug use, it has been more difficult to address the needs of lesbians and other SSA women.

Efforts to address lesbian health needs are hampered by lack of research, poor understanding of the issues by potential funding bodies, and the lack of a single defining health issue (such as HIV among gay men) around which to focus advocacy efforts. Equally problematic is the absence of consideration given to lesbians and SSA women in any Australian national and state health policies.

## The issues

- The *Sydney Women and Sexual Health (SWASH) Survey* is a bi-annual community survey of around 1000 women engaged with the LGBT community in Sydney. Unpublished data from the 2010 *Sydney Women and Sexual Health (SWASH) Survey* indicates much higher rates of ecstasy, cannabis, amphetamine and cocaine use among non-heterosexual women than among women in the 2007 *National Drug Strategy Household Survey* (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Rates of recent drug use by non-heterosexual women in the 2010 SWASH Survey compared with women in the 2007 Household Survey**



- The disparity between heterosexual and SSA women's drug use is reflected internationally: a meta-analysis of 18 studies of sexual orientation and adolescent substance use found the odds of substance use by young SSA women was 4 times higher than that of heterosexual young women.<sup>2</sup>
- A recent international review indicates that lesbians who use drugs experience barriers to health services in relation to both their gender and sexuality in ways that are socially determined.<sup>3</sup>
- Previous studies provide mixed results on rates of health service access by same sex attracted and transgender people. A recent Australia study found, however, that women from minority sexualities were less likely to report having a regular GP, and were more likely to report dissatisfaction with their health care.<sup>4</sup>
- Lesbians and other SSA women may experience discrimination as a barrier to accessing healthcare. Such discrimination may be actual, or perceived; direct, or indirect; or systemic.
- In addition to elevated rates of drug and alcohol use, SSA women in Australia have lower than optimal cancer screening, preventative health seeking behaviours and STI testing rates, as well as reported higher rates of dissatisfaction with their health care service providers. Despite these differences, the Australian healthcare system treats lesbian health as synonymous with women's health.

<sup>2</sup> Marshal MP, Friedman MS, et al. (2008) "Sexual orientation and adolescent substance use: a meta-analysis and methodological review," *Addiction*, 103(4):546-56.  
<sup>3</sup> Roberts, A, Mathers, B and Degenhardt, L on behalf of the Reference Group to the UN on HIV and injecting drug use (in draft 2010) *Women who inject drugs: A review of their risks, experiences and needs*.  
<sup>4</sup> McNair, R, Saalbach, LA, and Hughes, TL (2011) "Health status, health service use, and satisfaction according to sexual identity of young Australian women" *Women's Health Issues* 21(1):40-47.

- The *SWASH* study found that drug use was particularly high among queer and bisexual women, who also tend to be younger.<sup>1</sup> The *SWASH Survey* recruits a convenience sample of women at events connected with the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, as well as some community health services. As such we would expect this group to be younger, more urban and perhaps more engaged with urban party scenes than the Household Survey's population-based sample.

<sup>1</sup> Mooney-Somers, J, Deacon, RM, Richters, J, León de la Barra, S, Schneider, K, Prestage, G, Clayton, S, Parkhill, N (in preparation) *Women in contact with the gay and lesbian community in Sydney: The Sydney Women and Sexual Health survey 2006, 2008, 2010*. Sydney: ACON.

## Framing a response with limited resources

ACON has addressed these issues through the development of its *Lesbian Health Strategy 2008-2011*, the first of its kind in Australia. This document brings together key research on the health status and needs of SSA women, and underscores the need for capacity building around provision of appropriate services to this group. The Strategy focuses on the need to build programs which inform, educate and assist the health system and women to tackle the root causes of health problems such as social exclusion.

To date, the Lesbian Health Project at ACON has delivered a range of successful outcomes and service provision to lesbians and SSA women has expanded across many areas of the organisation. Challenges remain with regard to how best to position lesbian health to secure new and sustainable funding.

In the absence of adequate resourcing, the *Lesbian Health Strategy* and ACON's LGBT health agenda have been instrumental in supporting organisational efforts to re-allocate existing funds to create resources that meet the needs of lesbians who use drugs.

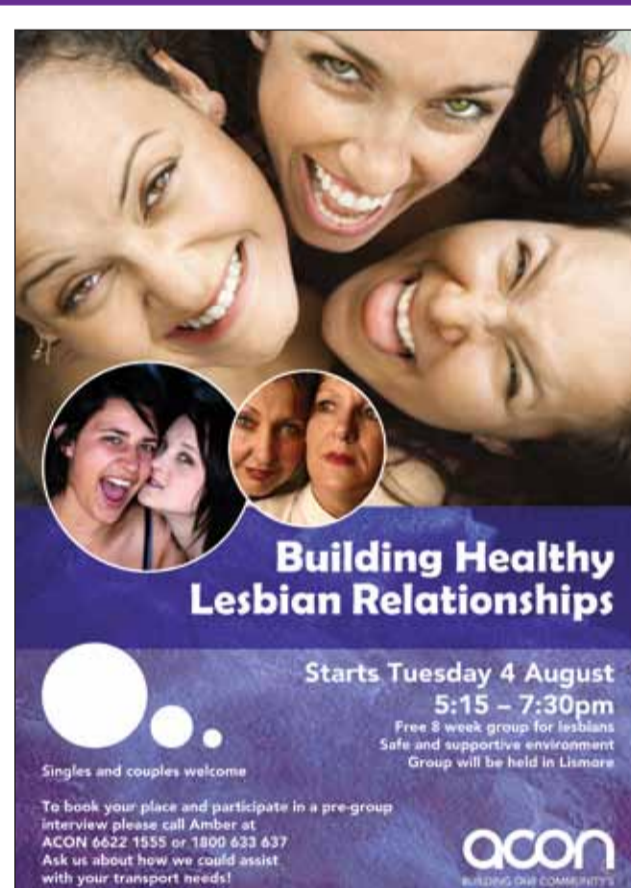


Turning Point ACON

## Recent work

In response to the consistently low uptake of both harm reduction and treatment services by SSA women, ACON has successfully advocated with a major funder of our drug and alcohol work to re-allocate some existing funding to produce SSA-women specific drug resources, in the interests of equity. This project (currently under development) seeks to engage with networks of SSA women who use drugs and who do not normally access ACON's drugs and alcohol services, to produce resources that 'speak to' their issues.

The Lesbian Health Project and the Alcohol and Other Drugs Program pool funding from disparate sources to produce events and resources that meet shared objectives of improving the health of people who use drugs, and increasing SSA women's access to relevant health services.



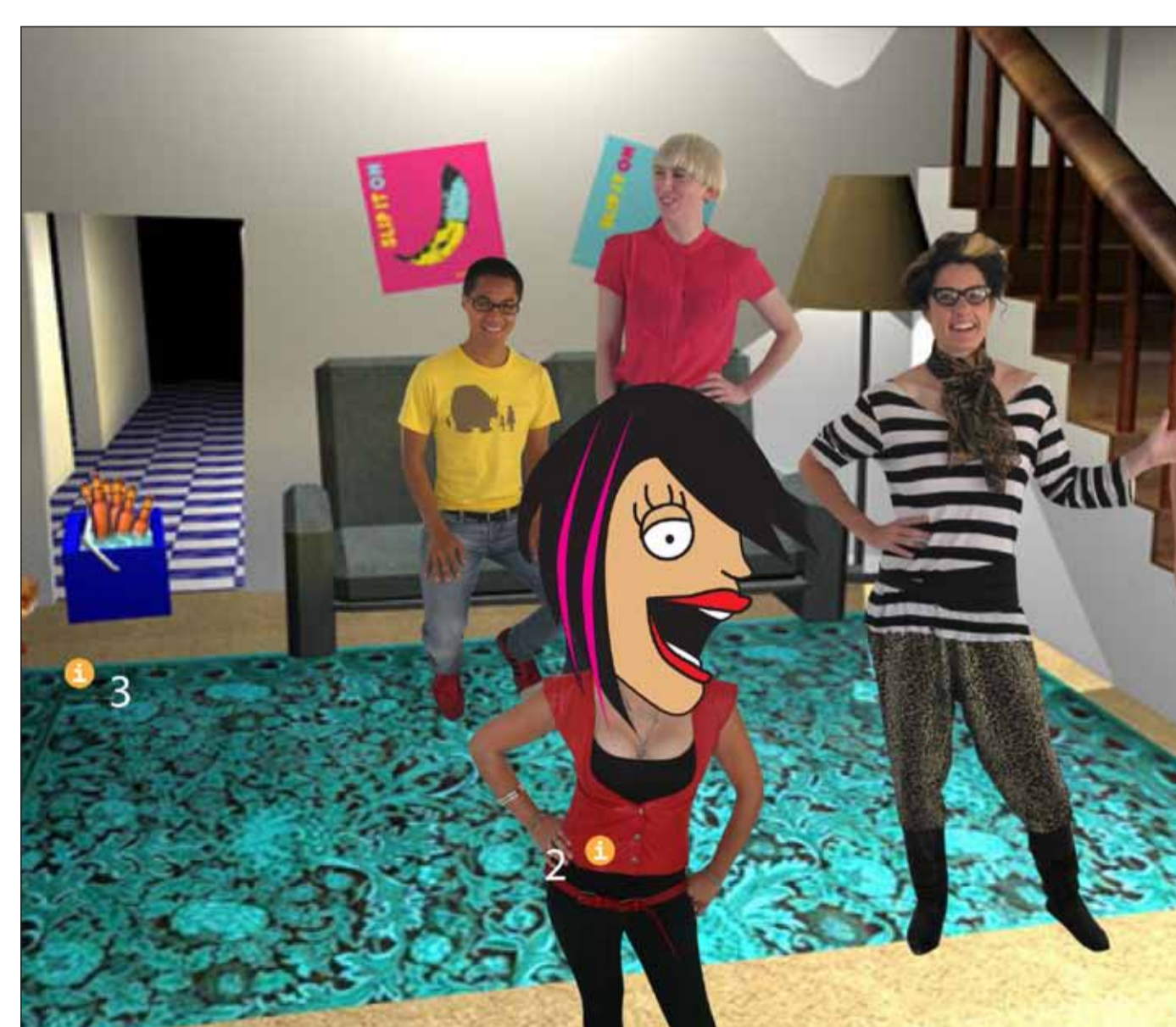
Poster for Lesbian Support Group



Bighead Mascot supporting a Women's Roller Derby match.



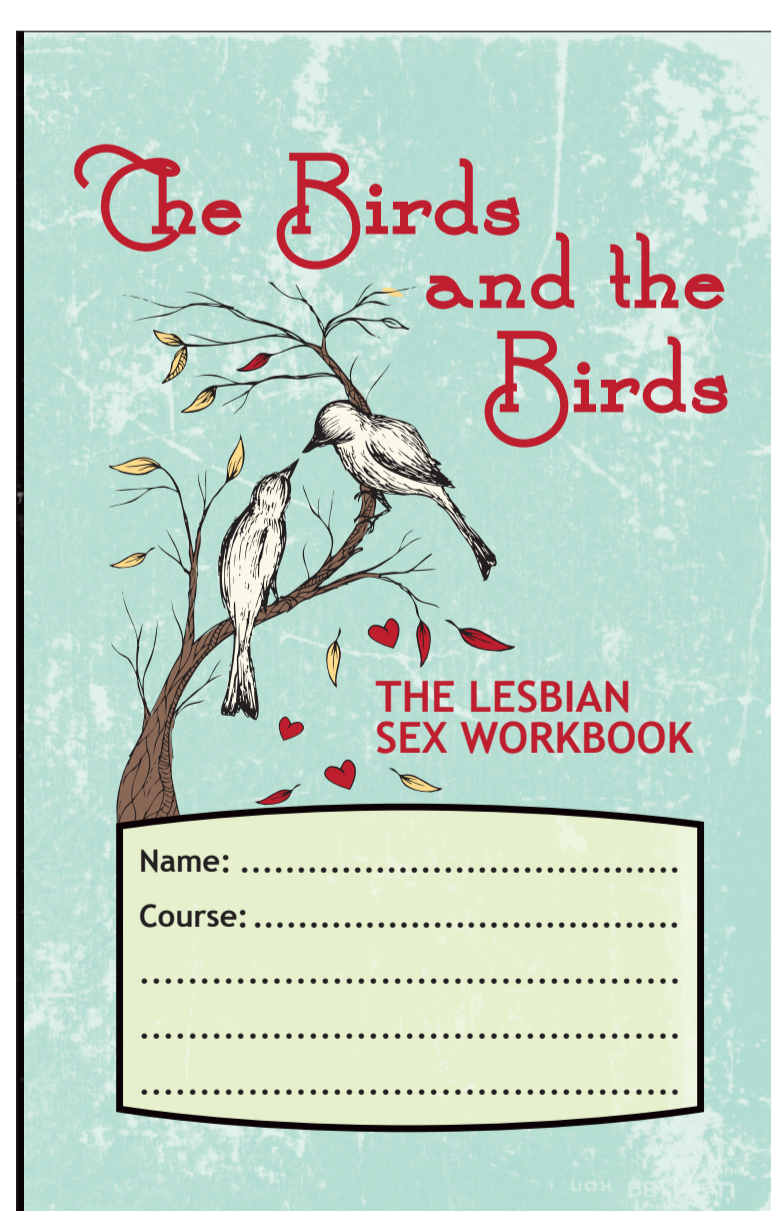
Bighead Mascot mingling with the crowd and spreading a message of health at Mardi Gras Fair Day



Scene from the online game, Party Safely With The Bigheads



Becky Bighead has a messy night, Party Safely With The Bigheads



The Birds and the Birds Lesbian Sexual Health Workbook



Promotional poster for a Lesbian Health Forum

## Next steps

ACON continues to advocate for recognition and prioritisation of SSA women's health issues in the National Women's Health Policy and other public policy.

Recognising that sexual orientation is a social determinant of health that impacts on individual and population health outcomes, ACON continues to advocate for the inclusion of a sexuality question in all health related research, to improve the evidence base for the health status and needs of SSA women.

The Lesbian Health Project provides sexual diversity training for mainstream health care providers, with a focus on competency in service delivery. This is delivered through conference presentations, resource reviews, partnership work and training days. Mainstream health service providers need to be equipped with the skills to appropriately provide for and respond to the needs of lesbians and SSA women, and national guidelines and training ought to be included as part of the policy and program response to aged care into the future.

The Alcohol and Other Drugs Program actively recruits SSA women to become involved in ACON's peer-based harm reduction programs such as the Needle Syringe Program Peer Education Project, in an effort to create a more welcoming environment for SSA clients.