Media release: New Report finds Discrimination is bad for health

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There is a strong relationship between cultural discrimination and poor mental health, a new report by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) shows.

“The report shows there is a clear link between culturally-based discrimination and mental health problems, particularly depression,” Mr Harper said.
Mr Harper highlighted that such discrimination is also linked to both cigarette smoking as well as drug and alcohol misuse.

In addition, a number of previous studies are also highlighted in the report, showing an association between discrimination and physical health problems such as heart disease, weight problems, diabetes and low infant birth weight.

VicHealth CEO Todd Harper says “Victoria has a good record of fostering cultural diversity, yet the study indicates that people from migrant and refugee backgrounds continue to experience unacceptably high levels of discrimination, in turn affecting their health and wellbeing.”

Over 40 per cent of Victorians are either born overseas or have a parent born overseas. “Over two million Victorians, from culturally and linguistically diverse communities are at risk of the health impacts of discrimination,” Mr Harper says.

It is encouraging that there is strong support for embracing diversity, Mr Harper adds. “New VicHealth data shows that nine out of ten Victorians (90%) agree it is a good for society to be made up of different cultures.”

And Victorians have more respectful attitudes towards cultural diversity than Queenslanders, New South Wales’ residents and many other people from comparative industrialised countries, according to the research.

However, Mr Harper says the new VicHealth study on Community Attitudes to culturally based discrimination found many people from a non-English speaking background experience discrimination due to their ethnic origin:

- Nearly two in five had experienced discrimination in the workplace at some time (three times as likely as those born in Australia).
- Nearly one in three (30%) had experienced discrimination in education at some time (twice as likely as those born in Australia).
- Nearly one in five (18%) reported having experienced discrimination in housing at some time (four times more likely as those born in Australia).
- 19 per cent reported having experienced discrimination in policing at some time (three times more likely as those born in Australia).
- Nearly one in two (45%) reported having had such experiences at a sporting or other public event at some time.

Dr Mukesh Haikerwal, GP and immediate past President of the AMA, says that evidence from the World Health Organisation (WHO), shows that around the world, culturally-based discrimination leads to violence and trauma that has implications for people over generations.

“In my work as a GP in the western suburbs of Melbourne I can see the benefits to patients where they feel more a part of the community and are better socially connected. The scourge of discrimination is never far away but the benefits of embracing diversity improve their sense of health and wellbeing.”

“From my experience, people who feel they are discriminated against at work and the social context suffer more readily from mental illness including, depression and anxiety. This may to lead to some having to take time off work,” Dr Haikerwal added.

Mr Harper says, “Preventing discrimination will provide social, economic and health benefits for all Victorians.”

The report highlights the need to target workplaces, educational settings and sporting environments as key places where discrimination is likely to occur, Mr Harper says.

The AFL has taken important steps in the area of preventing discrimination recently. Its Multicultural Program is having a positive impact on migrant and refugee communities, as well as the broader football community.

AFL CEO Andrew Demetriou says that too many newly arrived immigrant and refugee people experience discrimination.

Mr Demetriou says “Many people from culturally diverse backgrounds feel disconnected and isolated from Australian social experiences.”

“We hope the Multicultural Football Program will combat this level of isolation and encourage refugees and immigrant young people to become involved with Australian Football. It can become the glue that brings communities together,” Mr Demetriou says.

Parliamentary Secretary for Human Services, Telmo Languiller said he was encouraged the report noted that 90 per cent of those surveyed agree that it’s a good thing for society to be made up of different cultures.

”While Victoria is known for its reputation as a tolerant and diverse society, discrimination still exists, and as the report shows us, the health impacts of such discrimination need to be taken seriously,” he said.

“The Brumby Government has taken a leadership role in promoting tolerance and understanding in the community and is also the national leader in mental health, providing the highest number of mental health beds per capita in Australia and allocating in this year’s State Budget an extra $69 million on top of the $472 million over five years already committed.”

Mr Harper says it is essential that all levels of government, community organisations and sporting bodies like the AFL work out effective ways of reducing discrimination and the flow on health effects.

“Developing local solutions that take into account local circumstances and pressure points will also be important for tackling discrimination in particular communities and regions,” Mr Harper says.

VicHealth’s nationally significant report is titled:
More than Tolerance: Embracing diversity for health – Discrimination affecting migrant and refugee communities in Victoria, its health consequences, community attitudes and solutions.

http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Content.aspx?topicID=494