

Transcript: Jeremy Wiggins, CEO Transcend Australia interview with Annie Gaffney, ABC Radio Queensland, 5:10pm, 28 January 2025

Summary: The Queensland Government's decision to pause public access to puberty blockers and hormone therapies for people under 18 years old has sparked concern and condemnation from families, medical experts, trans and human rights advocates. The move, tied to a new review of gender-affirming treatments, leaves many trans young people without essential medical care, causing fear over potential mental health crises. CEO of Transcend Australia, Jeremy Wiggins, discusses the high costs and risks associated with this decision, emphasizing the effectiveness and reversibility of puberty blockers. He calls for clear support plans from the government and directs listeners to www.transcendaustralia.org.au for reliable, evidence-based information and help.

Annie Gaffney: Jeremy Wiggins is the CEO of Transcend Australia and has been receiving worried phone calls today from families in Queensland. What does this pause on access to puberty blockers and hormone therapies for under 18s mean for transgender Queenslanders?

Jeremy Wiggins: This primarily affects trans children and young people under 18 and their families who are wanting to help their kids to live happy and healthy lives and to have the access to the health care they need.

The incoming Liberal government has acted within three months of taking office to politicize a health issue for quite a small, marginalized community that is often misunderstood by using an alleged administrative issue at one regional service to call for an investigation that has statewide implications.

What it means is that any trans young person under the age of 18 who needs access to care will effectively be denied access to that care. They won't be able to register as a patient with no alternative options and parents and families are terrified about that.

Annie Gaffney: What have you been hearing from those families today, Jeremy?

Jeremy Wiggins: Families are calling me, worried about whether their children will be able to keep accessing their treatment, whether they will get accepted as a new referral to a service. They're worried about the mental health of their children the risk of suicide and self-harm, which are all risk factors when you deny treatment to a young person.

They're worried that their children and other children like their own won't have the same chances of achieving optimal health or the same level of health as their siblings. These families are average Australian families living across metro, regional, and rural Queensland that want all their kids - including their trans kids - to live happy, healthy lives.

For those that don't have this experience, you're hearing a lot of noise at times, thinking that it's 'woke' or 'gender ideology'. It's not true. That doesn't exist. That's words that are made up by anti-trans groups looking to dehumanize a vulnerable population. And I can't underestimate what a disaster it is to shut down care or deny care to a vulnerable group of people that need access to care.

People deserve privacy to make, and the right to make personal decisions about their bodies and their medical care without political interference.

Annie Gaffney: Were you surprised about this announcement today?

Jeremy Wiggins: Sadly, no. The Liberal Party across different states and in recent State and Federal elections have used trans people as a political weapon. There were some policies circulated where they would ban access to treatment if elected, but it's often to use our communities to gain political power. It's unethical and it continues to jeopardize the safety of trans people. It places us at the centre of this political and media storm and what's really concerning is that Queensland Health just completed a comprehensive review of this exact same issue.

The Queensland Children's Gender Service went through a one-year comprehensive review by an independent review panel. It was found that the care delivered there was safe and effective, despite claims by some anti-trans activists that are looking to shut down care for trans young people.

Parents are not being excluded from this process, and parents and families and young people are not being rushed through this process.

The care is multidisciplinary, expert, comprehensive. It's a long period of time that people go through assessments. It's not an easy process to go through. And it's good quality care. I am surprised that the government are spending unnecessary funds in such a fiscally tight climate, where families are struggling with cost-of-living crisis, on an unnecessary review when they've just done a review.

Annie Gaffney: This is ABC Radio Queensland. Jeremy Wiggins is my guest. He's CEO of Transcend Australia. Jeremy, for people who don't know too much about puberty blockers, what do they do and are they reversible?

Jeremy Wiggins: Puberty blockers have been around for 30 to 40 years. They weren't invented for trans children. In fact, puberty blockers are probably prescribed more to kids that aren't trans for precocious puberty. There is discrimination here as there's a focus on the use of a medication for one group of people versus the other. But for trans young people, it's a lifesaving pause on the onset of pubertal development, while they continue to access psychological and psychiatric support, counselling so they can understand if that it's the right pathway for them.

If they decide not to continue with treatment, they can stop it. It's a hundred percent reversible.

If they feel like it's the right course of action for them, and they are well supported, and it's clinically relevant for their needs, they can progress to another stage of hormone therapy. It has better outcomes for people to access care early on in life, rather than delaying access to treatment.

It has great outcomes for them later in life for their mental health and wellbeing. This is what is the heart of this issue. We want young people to live long, happy, healthy lives later into adulthood and to not have the other public health burdens that they may experience if they're denied access to care.

Annie Gaffney: If public access to puberty blockers and hormones is paused until this new review is complete, how expensive is this kind of treatment access through the private system?

Jeremy Wiggins: I would describe it as very expensive. Without publicly funded services the medical costs would fall to the family. And right now, in a cost-of-living crisis, families with complex health needs do not need that extra financial burden. The out-of-pocket costs would soar into the thousands per year - that combines private consultation fees, medication costs. It would end up becoming an impossible barrier where parents are forced to make a difficult decision about their budgets, some possibly not being able to access care at all.

This leaves their children in a vulnerable position with their safety and mental health and wellbeing.

My question to Minister Nicholls and the Queensland Government is - What's your plan to support these families who are being blocked from care? What other support plans in place? Are they just going to leave these families of vulnerable young people in the dark while they complete their review?

Annie Gaffney: There's a lot of misinformation and disinformation out there about gender affirming care. If people want to get educated, where can they go?

Jeremy Wiggins: That's absolutely true. Sadly, if anyone's looking anywhere politically, whether it be the UK or the US, trans people are a hot topic. I don't know why everyone is so obsessed with us! We just want to get on with our lives, but it's because we're being misled.

There's so much disinformation out there, but information is available. If you want evidence-based fact sheets, head to the Transcend Australia website, www.transcend.org.au. These evidence-based fact sheets that cuts through the misinformation.

This is not the big bad issue that everyone's making it out to be.

It only affects a small part of the community. It's been incredibly overblown and a disproportionate response.

If I can just say, if there's any trans people, trans young people, families listening out there, I want you to know that you're important, that you know who you are, and you deserve healthcare to surround yourself with people who care about you and, and lift you up.

If you're a young person, contact Open Doors Youth Service or QLife for support and families and parents can contact Transcend Australia.

Annie Gaffney: Good to speak with you, Jeremy. Thank you. Thank you. Jeremy Wiggin, CEO of Transcend Australia.