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Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
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Dear Committee Secretary

**Re: Enhancing Online Safety for Children Bill 2014 and Enhancing Online Safety for Children (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2014**

The AMA is pleased to provide comments on the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Enhancing Online Safety for Children Bills. As an organisation that represents the interests of medical professionals, and advocates for improved health in the broader community, the AMA is committed to promoting and ensuring the online safety of children and young people in Australia.

Not only do many children and young people have access to the internet, they are also spending large amounts of time online. In terms of safeguards, parents, teachers and other professionals may be tasked with overseeing children and young people who are using the internet. But, with the growth in mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets, many children and young people spend significant amounts of time online with little or no supervision. This can make cyber bullying particularly difficult to escape, continuing on well and truly after the school day is finished.

The AMA recognises that cyber-bullying among children and young people is a significant health and welfare issue. Research about the impacts of cyber bullying is still in its infancy, but there is a strong suggestion that the long-term impacts of cyber-bullying are serious, including a potentially increased risk of suicidal thoughts and suicide. Detrimental health impacts have been observed in children who participate in bullying, as well as those who experience bullying.

The *Enhancing Online Safety for Children Bill 2014* and the *Enhancing Online Safety for Children (Consequential Amendments Bill) 2014* (the Bills) recognise the importance of online safety for children and young people, including the need to protect children from cyber bullying as well as the need to work with large social networking sites to remove of harmful content. The AMA has publicly congratulated the Government on the introduction of these Bills. It is an emerging area, and a strong evidence base about how to best protect children and young people has not been fully established. However, the lack of evidence does not mean that children and young people should remain unprotected. These Bills are proactive and contain measures that are unlikely to restrict, and may significantly improve online safety for Australian children and young people.

The AMA supports the establishment of a Children's E-Safety Commissioner to:

- take a national leadership role in online safety for children;
- promoting online safety by coordinating relevant Government activities;
- support, conduct, accredit and evaluate education and community awareness programs about online safety;
- to deal with persons who post cyber-bullying material targeting an Australian child, and
- to work with large social media providers to remove harmful content aimed at a child within 48 hours of a request from the Commissioner.

The AMA recognises that it is difficult to fully remove any content from the internet once posted, but the prevention of cyber-bullying and quick remedies to those situations when they arise are worthy goals.

The AMA is comfortable that the Children's E-Safety Commissioner will work under the auspices of the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). Given ACMA's experience in media and communications regulations this appears to be a suitable arrangement. However, it is of critical importance that the Children's E-Safety Commissioner has access to child and adolescent health and development expertise to inform the Commissioners proposed activities.

It is also worth noting that the National Children's Commissioner has already undertaken some activities in relation to cyber safety. While the two Commissioners will approach online safety from different angles (in terms of child welfare and media regulation) they will need to work closely to prevent any duplication of effort.

As noted, online safety for children and young people is an emerging area of interest in terms of policy and legislative protections. Section 107 of the *Enhancing Online Safety for Children Bill 2014*, provides for a review of the legislation. This is vitally important as changes are likely to be required to the role of the Children's E-Safety Commissioner and the complaints system, over time.

I would like to thank the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee for extending an opportunity to provide these comments. If you have any queries or require further information please contact Josie Hill, Policy Adviser, Public Health, Australian Medical Association on 02 6270 5446 or [jhill@ama.com.au](mailto:jhill@ama.com.au)

Yours sincerely



Prof Brian Owler  
President

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