

Conference Report:

Kindling the Flame – Promoting Mental Health & Wellbeing

In February this year, I attended a three-day conference in Perth to present a paper titled, “Men’s Sheds – A Community Approach to Mental Health and Wellbeing”. The conference, ‘Kindling the Flame: Promoting Mental Health & Wellbeing’, was run by the Clifford Beers Foundation, based in the UK.

The opportunity arose out of a series of fortunate events, beginning with a group project in Health Skills Development. For this project we interviewed the facilitator of the Darebin Men’s Shed about his work with men in a group setting. Following this, the group were invited to assist in a research project for the Office of Senior Victorians with Rick Hayes and Shelby Williamson, undertaking various tasks such as survey development and database management. Chris Ford and I then went on to assist with the development of the ‘Best Practice Guidelines for Victorian Men’s Sheds’, writing a number of case studies on Sheds in Victoria.

In 2006, I saw a call for abstracts for the conference, and suggested that we submit a paper. Rick Hayes (project leader) outlined the abstract, I assisted in writing it up and Chris and Shelby provided some editorial guidance. We submitted the abstract according to the guidelines set out and it was accepted. In the beginning, I imagined we would go to the conference as a team, however life circumstances intervened and in the end I journeyed to Perth alone.

The conference addressed 5 main themes; 1) The Construct of Mental Health – what does it mean to be mentally healthy? 2) Influences on mental health (social and economic determinants and cultural factors) 3) Who is responsible for mental health promotion? 4) How do you do mental health promotion? and 5) Mental Health Promotion 2007 and beyond. Keynote speakers addressed each of the themes and symposiums, innovative presentations and posters further elucidated the themes across the three days.

While all of the keynote speakers were of high quality, there were a number of particularly memorable keynote presentations. On the first day, Margaret Barry (National University of Ireland) gave a clear and thought-provoking presentation on the construct of mental health – focussing upon the positive aspects of mental health. Many of the later presenters referred back to her comments throughout the week.

Rob Moodie (CEO VicHealth) gave an energising and inspiring talk on the importance of how we treat each other. After citing statistics on burden of disease due to violence, social exclusion and bullying, he reminded the conference delegates of the importance of being aware of how they relate to others in their lives. He championed the idea that we can all contribute to mental health through our interactions with others, through celebrating diversity, integrating new arrivals, providing protection and empowerment of minority groups. He invited participants to ask of themselves: How can we be more inclusive? How can we discriminate less? How can we bully each other less? How can we be less violent? He also encouraged everyone to ensure they are kind to themselves – by taking 30 minutes of every day to practice yoga, prayer, meditation, or even walking the dog.

On the third day, Mark Bin Baker gave a presentation on mental health promotion and wellbeing for indigenous Australians, using humour as a powerful health promotion tool. He shared the story of his work as alter-ego 'Mary G', and the impact this work has had on indigenous people across Australia. His presentation showed how one person can make a huge impact in the lives of many through the creative medium.

My presentation was scheduled for the morning of the third day, so I had plenty of time to work up some nerves! The presentation was received well by those attending the symposium and a number of delegates had questions and comments afterward. I was able to hand out business cards and advise individuals of appropriate contacts for further information. The presentation was a great opportunity to practice skills learned in subjects such as Health Skills Development and Participatory Field Placement.

In addition to hearing the presentations given throughout the conference, I also had the opportunity to meet with many health promotion professionals from across Australia. I got to chat about my interests and experience with potential future employers, and in doing so, further developed my professional networks. I was also fortunate to take part in a morning walk along the Swan River through which I learned about local indigenous culture and spirituality.

Overall, I felt the conference was a wonderful learning opportunity and I am grateful to have had the chance to participate. I highly recommend that all students look out for upcoming conferences and make the effort to attend them. A good way to hear about conferences is through the Australian Health Promotion Association, Public Health Association Australia or Victorian Health Promotion Network. For more information, you can see the websites/email below or contact me on ma2morgan@students.latrobe.edu.au.

Web Addresses:

AHPA: www.healthpromotion.org.au

PHAA: <http://www.phaa.net.au/>

Email:

VHPN: hp.network@hotmail.com