Rural Health Under the Spotlight

STUART AUCKLAND, CHAIR
Rural Health Week State Planning Committee

Rural communities throughout Tasmania recently participated in the first state-wide Rural Health Week event. The week involved the staging of over 60 individual health and wellbeing promotional activities.

The activities were coordinated by 28 regional planning groups, which comprised representatives from Local Government as well as the health, education and community sectors. Each group coordinated a variety of activities which included health expos, rural health forums, healthy eating promotional activities, healthy mind and body exercises, school fun and fitness days, family activity days, seminars and workshops for farmers, women, young people and the elderly.

Rural Health Week is an initiative of the University Department of Rural Health and the Department of Health and Human Services. Representatives of major stakeholder agencies, including the Local Government Association of Tasmania, assisted with the development of the project as members of the State Planning Committee.

Rural Health Week is an opportunity to showcase the diverse ways in which rural communities are working together and to provide a forum for rural communities to tell their stories in the way that best reflects their interests and aspirations about health and wellbeing. It was also an opportunity for local health service providers and their respective communities to come together and take action on priority health issues.

A highlight of Rural Health Week was the presentation of the inaugural Tasmanian Rural Health Week Awards. Awards were presented to finalists in two categories; the Rural Health Week Community Award and the Rural Health Week Worker Award. Both awards recognised the commitment made by individuals to the health and wellbeing of their community. A total of 46 nominations were received from both categories, with the finalists announced at a gala ceremony held in Launceston. Awards were presented to Annette Barrett, winner of the Rural Health Week Worker Award, and Mark Jones, winner of the Rural Health Week Community Award. Both winners received cheques to the value of $1,000 to support further community health initiatives in their respective localities.

Annette Barrett has been the Manager at the Westbury Community Health Centre since 1994. During this time, she has been a leader in change management, supporting both her colleagues and her community. Annette has been at the forefront of transforming the old Westbury Hospital into a vibrant health centre, which offers an innovative range of programs and services. The Westbury Community Health Centre is now the most comprehensive in the state.

Mark Jones is an active member of the Oatlands community. He has been instrumental in providing leadership and support as chairperson for the Midlands Multi-purpose Health Centre Community Advisory Committee. Under his chairmanship, Mark has ensured that the committee is actively engaged with the community and continuously working towards good outcomes for both the health service staff and the local community.

Runners-up were Donna Darke from Campbell Town in the Community Award category, and Lester Jones from Deloraine in the Health Worker Award category. Due to its success in its inaugural year, Rural Health Week looks set to become a permanent fixture on the Tasmanian event calendar.

For more information, please visit www.rhwtas.com.au.
Healthy Solutions for Your Workplace

JO CORDELL-COOPER
Active Solutions and Health Network

Proactive workplaces around the globe are implementing health and wellbeing programs in an attempt to gain an advantage over competitors. What does this mean? What are the advantages, and what are businesses trying to achieve?

Whether the workplace is after improved productivity, reduced sick leave, improved retention, attraction of new staff, an improved sense of pride in the workplace, corporate citizenship, or ‘Employer of Choice’ status, there is so much research on the economic benefits of health and wellbeing programs, that it is rarely disputed. However, managers need a clear idea of what they are trying to achieve and must ensure that the benefits to employees are clear and non-threatening, for these programs to be really effective.

Approaching employees about ways they can improve their health is generally well received, as most people are interested in their health. Others may feel quite protective of information about their health, particularly if they have a level of ill health and want to keep it private. Clearly, when you are asking for workplaces, and ultimately employees, to change their lifestyle, it is vital that these changes are welcome and relevant. Participation in a health and wellbeing program is preferably voluntary, and surveys should be anonymous and confidential. They do need to provide you with enough information to meaningfully follow up groups you wish to target, like overweight employees that exercise irregularly. That is why hiring an independent health and wellbeing consultant can help you get honest and unbiased information. They are a neutral link between employees and senior management, which can enhance participation, and they can view the workplace with fresh eyes.

Identifying the causes of why employees may not be making healthy choices is a complex task - something that requires a long-term commitment, often there is no quick fix. What a health and wellbeing program does is remind workplaces to make the healthy choice easy and the unhealthy choice harder. Simple changes such as removing the vending machines and providing fresh fruit and clean water are two examples of this approach.

Developing ways to improve levels of physical activity during the workday is another way to improve the health of employees, as well as improving productivity. Many jobs, particularly office jobs are sedentary in nature - this is not going to change. So instead, a health and wellbeing program might focus on developing an active culture around work, which is essential if employees are to improve their health. Getting involved in community-based events such as Get Walking Tasmania Week, Walk to Work Day, and Ride to Work Day are all non-competitive ways to increase levels of physical activity. They can be used as catalysts to start regular walking groups or to change workplace habits. Other workplaces may already have a strong culture of regular exercise of a moderate nature, but find their staff lacking in opportunities to exercise vigorously, or at a high intensity. One strategy may be to organise corporate gym memberships with reduced fees, or become involved in corporate triathlon series, or running events.

Successful health and wellbeing programs require input from staff at all levels. There is no point initiating such a program if management and staff are not interested, or do not actively take part. Ideally, employees at all levels work together to develop a policy, and drive the direction of the health and wellbeing program.

There are certainly a number of ways for a workplace to tackle health and wellbeing issues, as well as a variety of resources available on the Internet. The Premier’s Physical Activity Council’s Get Moving at Work kit being a great place to start. Resources can be downloaded from www.getmoving.tas.gov.au. Otherwise, consider appointing an independent consultant who can develop and tailor a program to suit the specific needs of your organisation.

For further information, contact Jo Cordell-Cooper at the Active Solutions and Health Network on 6243 0552.
Brighton Council has taken out the top award in the Medibank Private Active Towns Awards, announced in September, having been recognised for its Brighton Alive project that has encouraged the community to lead healthy and active lifestyles.

Brighton received $10,000 in prize money for the program which incorporates local events such as family bike days, cricket matches, school surfing and disc golf, to increase the community’s participation in physical activity. An important feature of the program is that it offers a variety of activities and has been designed to be fun so that the youth of Brighton are keen to join in. One of the most popular Brighton Alive activities during the cricket season is street cricket. A game last season saw Tasmanian Tigers’ team members Luke Butterworth who is also an Australian A Team member, and Andrew Downton join in the activity.

Brighton Alive was established after a community forum recognised the need for a more coordinated approach to a range of issues, including opportunities to improve the health and wellbeing of Brighton residents. The program is strongly supported by an active website at www.brightonalive.com.au that provides information on current and future activities planned for the municipality.

Launceston City Council was also recognised for taking an active approach to community health. Its Active City Park program received the Best Initiative Award and a joint award for Population Category City. The program, now in its third year, offers a range of free, outdoor physical activities including yoga, Tai Chi and cross training for residents of all ages. To date, 449 participants have taken part in a total of 1,190 hours of activities. Due to the program’s success, Council will run this year’s series throughout the entire daylight savings period, from 1 October until 24 March 2008. The program is coordinated in partnership with Women’s Health North and the National Council for Women.

The Medibank Private Active Towns Awards are an initiative of the Premier’s Physical Activity Council, which acknowledges and supports active communities and schools, and promotes the importance of physical activity for all Tasmanians.

Eating with Friends

Eating alone has been shown to impact adversely on seniors’ nutritional status, leading to a downward spiral of ill health and increased dependence. The overwhelming evidence that shared meals stimulate appetite and provide social interaction that lead to positive and diverse outcomes for those involved, were some of the issues that inspired the concept of Eating With Friends.

Eating With Friends is an innovative approach to improving the health and wellbeing of older Tasmanians and has been operating since 2000. Eating With Friends is a positive and effective mechanism to contribute to social connectedness, better nutrition and improved wellbeing for older Tasmanians.

Eating With Friends has become a community driven initiative with around twenty-five groups operating throughout Tasmania. There are a number of organisations involved in running the groups including community groups, schools, churches, neighborhood houses, ethnic communities and health centres. Volunteers and workers from these organisations plan and run the group’s activities. A steering committee, which runs under the auspices of the Glenorchy City Council, has encouraged and supported new and existing groups by providing advice, support and resources. Through funding obtained from the Department of Veteran’s Affairs, Eating With Friends now employs a project officer to provide additional support.

For further information about Eating With Friends, contact Project Officer, Louise Manka on 03 6336 2446.