

Men's Sheds—a catalyst for Indigenous men's health

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Introduction

There is now a practical model to help the Indigenous men and their communities improve their health and well being. It is called a *men's shed*.

The 'Shed' holds an important place in Australian male culture. Traditionally it is a 'man's space' where men have retreated from the hectic pace of work, life and family to make or repair things and to enjoy the company of other men. Due to changing property and social trends, the backyard shed is disappearing. These circumstances, combined with retirement or loss of a partner can result in loss of social networks, self-esteem and can cause adverse social and emotional health and well-being issues for many men. For Indigenous men, systematic disempowerment, loss of authority, hierarchies, traditional men's spaces, as well as loss of identity, connection with the land, respect, culture and spirituality, have also had profound negative impacts. A 'men's space' or a men's shed in conceptual terms, may provide an environment where metamorphosis can take place. (1)

At present, Australian men's sheds are a grassroots movement that is largely under-acknowledged, under-resourced and mostly unintegrated with the health system. They have emerged across the country in the absence of any policy framework, or support, or co-ordination at State or Federal level. This is largely unprecedented and unique among primary health care strategies in this country. (1)

For Indigenous men, where the concept of health is not easily separated from other aspects of life, men's sheds may have a particular role.

There is now a growing movement in Indigenous communities for Indigenous males to reconstruct and re-invigorate their male identities. This renaissance includes a re-establishment of the roles of Indigenous men as community leaders, mentors, teachers of men, boys and respected community elders (4).

Aim

This paper aims to describe the opportunity for the men's shed's to become catalysts for improving Indigenous men's social and emotional well being along with assisting health professionals to improve implementation of health initiatives.

Method

In 2007 Mensheds Australia received a grant (Department of Health and Ageing) to promote its men's shed models to rural, remote and Indigenous communities across Australia. Visits were made to some 50 communities around Australia to explore how the men's shed concept would benefit communities. We did not encounter any Indigenous men's sheds that were operational. However we did encounter a significant number of men's groups, most of whom want to become more involved in expanding their activities and finding support.

This initial grant was followed by further grants (Queensland Department of Communities and the Department of Education, Employment and Work Place Relations), to pilot how the models might be implemented over the next three years. Mensheds Australia (12) is now working in North Queensland and

the Northern Territory with the Queensland and Federal Governments on pilot programs to establish men's sheds in 11 communities.

This paper is based on the *Action Research* undertaken by Mensheds Australia in visitations to communities and in conducting the pilot programs.

Key issues

Men's health

Engaging men in health activities starts with the premise of getting men physically, mentally, socially and spiritually active.

With Indigenous males the average life expectancy is a woeful 59 years, 6 years less than Indigenous females and 20 years less than their non-Indigenous counterparts. This disparity increases with remoteness.

Significance to the Men's Shed movement is the growing body of evidence to support the premise that lesser social connectedness is associated with poorer health outcomes. (2)

Men's sheds thus presents governments, at all levels with a vehicle to facilitate delivery of primary health care services to men.

'Health' to Aboriginal people is a matter of determining all aspects of their life, including control over their physical environment, of dignity, of community self-esteem, and of justice. It is not merely the provision of doctors, hospitals, medicines or the absence of disease and incapacity.(3)

The life of many Indigenous males is but a continuing cycle of disadvantage, manifested by low levels of education, unemployment, poverty, alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, and unacceptable levels of incarceration. The corollary is high rates of preventable chronic disease, high rates of other illness and injury and premature morbidity and mortality.

Despite many policies, branches, departments and program areas responsible for various Indigenous affairs, there is no policy for Indigenous men's health (1).

While we know the health of Aboriginal men is generally poor, and often worse than Aboriginal women, we do not sufficiently understand much about the different ways in which Aboriginal men perceive their health. Nor do we understand how a Western model of health might engage more positively with Aboriginal men and their health needs. (7)

At the 3rd National Men's Health Conference held in Alice Springs in 1999, Indigenous delegates presented a Statement of Principles regarding the health concerns of Indigenous men. This called for Indigenous males to "*construct communities of interest*" to improve their health. (8)

Isolation

Men's sheds can assist men's health initiatives by addressing primary issues such as isolation and loneliness.

Decreased mental health, depression, diminished social and emotional well-being, combined with increased isolation, loneliness, and boredom, are looming as major health issues for men, with statistics clearly showing that Indigenous men suffer poorer health outcomes on almost every measure of health.

Daly and Smith (9) identified a key set of statistical variables that they regarded as indicators of exclusion from mainstream social and economic opportunities.

Misconceptions

Although Indigenous cultures are very strong, years of misconceptions, misunderstanding and indifference have affected them. White man's ways are always the best ways and short term appointments and programs will not bring about desired results.

Women's access to a steady income (Social Security) has adversely altered the relationships within the communities; as a result the struggle for status by men makes it difficult for them to retain their self-esteem and their role as head of the family.

With Indigenous men, hypothetical talk is often interpreted as fact and when ideas are not delivered, it builds mistrust and impedes progress. We must be careful to deal with what is real and what can actually be delivered, when introducing health initiatives.

Service gaps

Engaging men is a big issue faced by the health industry which includes getting men to take prescribed medications and manage their issues.

There is a gap between men and the health professionals in providing diversionary activities (alcohol, drugs, violence) and getting men active physically, mentally, socially and spiritually.

Clearly local health workers are overwhelmed by their current workloads and assigned to locations for short terms, never really getting to know, or be accepted by the communities.

Health services are difficult for men to access without an appropriate support environment for men. Men's sheds can address this gap by providing a venue for service delivery and helping to engage more men to become health workers or health support workers.

Why Men's Sheds are needed

Findings

- There is a lot of commonality in the wants and needs of men for a place to meet, have fun, discuss local issues and do practical things for themselves, their young men and their communities.
- Getting men active (a prelude to good health) is difficult in Indigenous communities. Emphasis is needed to match activities to each community for sustainable outcomes.
- Although sheds are diverse in organisation, structure and function they are common in purpose as a space for men. Men's sheds address the need for socialisation, friendship, self-esteem and the need for purposeful activity for all men: young men, unemployed men, older men, retired men, men with mental health problems and disengaged men.
- There is an increasing awareness of the Internet / Broadband which facilitates and encourages learning. Men's sheds offer venues for men to learn.
- Very few programs are specifically for men. Where programs exist, implementation is problematic, with few coming to workshops and project coordinators (usually women) indicating a difficulty in connecting with men.

- Many men seek activities that can earn income, create jobs and start businesses which can underpin improvements in health outcomes. Previous attempts have had limited success because of lack of support.
- Health programs can include the provision of health information, health promotion sessions, screening for particular health issues, informal access to health professionals and ongoing group support and in so doing they offer significant potential benefits for general health and well-being, although this has been poorly studied.
- Many communities lack capacity and will need to be developed incrementally with careful and complete steps and with a strong planning framework underpinning development.
- Personal visits play a key role in building trust and desire to move forward, particularly during the critical establishment period.

Discussion

There is no 'one model fits all' for men's sheds in Indigenous communities. Generalisations allow prejudice to enter thinking the form a men's shed might take and what benefits it can provide and should be avoided.

The problem with services and the way they are delivered is the assumption that men require needed services the same as women, without recognition of the different belief systems, needs and environments conducive to men engaging with the system.

Men's sheds can provide visible assurance that resources and programs are effective in advancing men's health, by adding value; leveraging health professional's activities, through continuity and by having more men take an active interest in their own health.

What men have said

Indigenous men suggested a men's shed could address:

- restoring hope, self-confidence and self-esteem
- helping men cope with isolation, loneliness and depression
- improving basic hygiene
- provide mentoring for men and boys to become self-sufficient, learn about culture, life and traditional skills to help them build a better future
- medical check ups and treatments, in a non-threatening environment
- to create a secure environment free from violence
- disciplining men for antisocial behaviour
- reinforcing traditional values and structures within communities
- participation in practical lifestyle activities and special outings
- creating jobs and new business opportunities to relieve financial stress and replace welfare mentality.

Key benefits of a men's shed

The key benefit comes from the delivery of better social and emotional health outcomes for men and boys and their community, while empowering them to escape from boredom, isolation and loss of self-esteem, respect, sense of purpose, substance abuse and problems of passive welfare. Other benefits include

- providing opportunity for diversionary activities, skills acquisition and productive outcomes
- help with intervention practices and problems associated with men of all ages
- men's sheds have the potential to reach and engage older and isolated men
- improved social and emotional well-being of men
- a vehicle for health promotion and illness prevention programs, providing an opportunity for men to learn about health, illness prevention and make more effective use of the health system.
- reduction in costs to the health system.

Conquering Indigenous disadvantage

Men's sheds infrastructure and systems can help meet the challenges by providing appropriate facility for men, currently lacking in most communities, helping men to participate in activities beyond what is available now.

The men's shed can cater for their young men, helping them to become actively involved in their communities, igniting their interest and respect for their culture, gaining self-esteem and taking responsibility for their lives.

Traditional Owners and Elders recognise the absence of a mainstream work ethic and want to change attitudes of welfare dependency.

In strengthening social and economic determinates of good Indigenous health, it is important to give them hope that things will improve and that they can once again make a positive difference to their community.

In conquering Indigenous disadvantage it is an imperative that we build valuable and sustainable men's sheds where the men have ownership and feel that they are once again in control of their destiny.

How men's sheds engage men and communities

Indigenous men are more easily engaged through observing an experienced person and then doing it themselves; we must show by doing, in a hands-on way. A number of communities have attempted to establish a men's shed with limited success, due mainly to the lack of a paid coordinator and a practical support organisation.

The proposed *'Flying Doctors Room'* has great appeal for engaging with health initiatives. It is hoped that this new initiative will have a big impact on men's health.

Programs must provide concrete outcomes, be practical and delivered in careful and complete steps. Short term results are not always possible.

There are excellent opportunities to work with organisations such as Mensheds Australia, The Royal Flying Doctors, Indigenous Community Volunteers, and Centre for Appropriate Technology, Desert Knowledge Australia making it easier to develop opportunities that will engage men.

We need to encourage corporations to undertake more long-term partnerships with Indigenous men's sheds as a prelude to engaging men.

Men often fear for their lives which can be very debilitating; much like bullying in schools. The men's shed should provide a safe haven for men to come forward in time of trouble, making it easier to engage them.

Engagement can be difficult because of language differences. The Indigenous man's view of the world is quite different to non-Indigenous men, they have a preference for the 'concrete', not 'possibilities'.

Consulting with communities and health professionals

When a men's shed is operating well, men start to communicate more freely and are more likely to discuss health issues that affect them and move towards getting professional help. Until then health professionals may meet with negative responses and outcomes.

The men's shed is not about 'secret men's business', it is the men's space and should be respected and valued by the community as its main role is to support the men.

Few programs specifically for men are being delivered and are usually facilitated by women, who can have difficulty connecting with men. The need for more male health workers should be urgently considered.

Local health workers are often only assigned for short terms, never getting to know, or be accepted by the men. Money and resources are wasted because of the high turnover, consistency is what's required.

Closing the gap in Indigenous health

Addressing the tyranny of distance is a primary consideration for men's health initiatives. Telecommunications and infrastructure offer opportunities to meet these challenges.

Self managed programs in men's sheds could be delivered in their own language, adapted to fit with traditional Indigenous health initiatives incorporating their 'bush medicine'. Many programs and materials are not culturally appropriate.

Indigenous volunteers are a way to bridge the gap. Our experience shows that the men like to listen to other men who have had health problems and get men to respond to the health professionals.

Men's shed *Case Studies* are being assembled that will further explore the men's shed concept as a way of bridging the gaps in remote and Indigenous health. (available later in 2009).

A men's shed health service model

We must deal with 'concrete' facts, not possibilities and take time to understand family relationships and we need to consult with a number of community members before we get all the answers we are looking for in establishing a model.

There are many cultural differences to overcome. Indigenous people employed to work with their people are often placed in a difficult situation, they not only have to deal with the people they work for, but with various family members and their expectations.

Mensheds Australia has adopted a technology infrastructure where the Internet plays a critical role in breaking down the 'tyranny of distance' in terms of learning and provision of information about men's health. This can be delivered right into the 'men's space'.

There is a need to leverage land care agendas as a way of engaging men's sheds and developing activities that are of high value to the overall well being of communities.

Young men need to be part of the model as many feel trapped and have little say in community affairs. Often, these frustrations are expressed through activities which bring them to the attention of the criminal justice system.

A few good men and a shed are central to the model. The problem so far has been, having too many people with too little experience and no guidelines for starting and running a men's shed.

The activities and services undertaken have a profound impact on the ultimate nature of the men's shed and its outcomes. Decisions should not be rushed into based on emotion, or an agency's self-interest.

Recognise the success factors that make a strong men's shed and what capacity they have for new initiatives that determine the speed of the desired outcomes.

Men's sheds are most vulnerable during the start-up phase, where enthusiasm is high, experience is minimal, processes are lacking and local capital is scarce. Success during the establishment phase will impact on the long-term viability of the shed. With poor support, progress will be slow and painful, the energy of participants will be sapped, and the champions may lose interest and motivation. If the process is well planned, supported, realistic in its aims and timely in its progress, then its achievements will generate energy that will continue to motivate those involved and others will want to help.

The men's shed can be an ideal environment for building men's resilience and self-reliance. The men's shed must have good facilitation, good leadership and the men must enjoy coming regularly.

Self-image and self-determination, lacking as a result of alcohol, unstable environments and drugs, is more likely to be restored because of a man's direct exposure to other men in a friendly environment.

Engaging the men and the community in health initiatives is an important attribute of a well run men's shed. Regular exposure of men to activities, where men talk and work on projects together, allows the introduction to specific health and well being programs.

Components of the model

While different communities have different priorities, there are many common threads that underpin a good model:

- local ownership
- local management and leadership
- planning
- adequate facilities
- infrastructure for practical support
- capacity building initiatives
- matching of activities to each community's needs.



A bus is used to promote men's health in Tenant Creek

Policy recommendations

- Men's sheds should be recognised at local, state and national level as being integral to primary health care service delivery for men.
- The concept of community men's sheds should become an important part of governments' health policies.
- Given the seriousness of substance abuse, diversionary activities and education initiatives undertaken in the men's sheds, be given higher priority.
- More focus on re-establishing old frameworks in Indigenous communities revolving around self-help and empowerment.
- Implement programs that can acquaint health professionals with the benefits of men's sheds and how they can best work in engaging men and leveraging their programs.
- Mensheds Australia (12) should work with government and non-government organisations in the development and dissemination of guidelines and support in the establishment and operation of sustainable men's sheds, the conduct of health promotion activities in men's sheds and the documentation and evaluation of men's sheds activities including health activities.

Future plans

Mensheds Australia has been funded to establishment men's sheds in the Northern Peninsula Area of Queensland and across the Northern Territory. These pilot programs will be used to further develop initiatives to improve the health and well being of Indigenous men and their communities.

Conclusion

The men's shed initiative has clearly opened doors for very substantial outcomes in men's health and well-being to be achieved for Indigenous men.

If we are to learn from the successes and failures in remote and Indigenous health, we would encourage the health industry to become more familiar with the men's shed concept and for governments to divert more funding for larger, more robust and sustainable community men's sheds as a legitimate avenue for the provision of primary health care services for Indigenous men.

The safe environment offered by a men's sheds, is conducive to learning and sharing information. In the case of at risk men and men not engaging well with the health system, the men's sheds offer an important opportunity for health promotion programs. A separate men's health area (e.g. The Flying Doctors Room) where they feel comfortable should be part of a men's shed.

The days of just throwing a 'few old, sick, unemployed or young blokes', with a few tools into a small shed, are disappearing and being replaced by organisations with substance and capacity.

There are a few 'men's groups' forming, but many find it difficult to keep such groups together without practical activities for the men.

Local ownership of a men's shed is very important and any support must be provided in this context. For instance, Indigenous men have said that "if we could secure a suitable building, some tools and a paid coordinator with support, we would clean up most of the problems (alcohol, drugs, violence, crime etc), without any further help and accomplish it within two years". An interesting exercise to facilitate and evaluate.

Capacity of communities to establish and grow valuable and sustainable men's sheds is low. Mensheds Australia (12) can provide solid direction and support for the growing of men's sheds across Australia, which was the reason for its establishment .

Further information

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Presenter

Peter Sergeant has researched and tested many methodologies relating to improving regional communities and utilising emerging technologies. This included steering the development of men's sheds across Australia. In 2008 Mensheds Australia was presented with a National Award for the implementation of a variety of uses of broadband in developing a framework for support and facilitation of men's health. During recent years he travelled to many regional, rural, remote and Indigenous communities and sees men's sheds as an important catalyst and practical way for improving men's health and wellbeing, as the men do themselves.