Increasing community capacity building—the Dungog Eat Well Program and Community Kitchen Partnership

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The ‘Dungog Eat Well’ (DEW) program was funded by the Commonwealth for three years to provide a dietetic service to the Dungog Shire located in rural New South Wales (population 8500). The program was established to provide individualised and group nutrition therapy to members of the community at risk of chronic disease. In addition to this, increasing community capacity building was considered an essential outcome of the program. Hence collaborating with pre-existing and trusted services was considered a high priority for community engagement and sustainability.

A partnership was formed with the service coordinator of the Dungog Shire Community Centre (DSCC), who identified a high proportion of families receiving food vouchers on a regular basis. A literature review identified a suitable program called Community Kitchens, which was initially developed in Frankston, Victoria in 2004 (communitykitchens.com). A planning meeting was held with DSCC coordinator, representatives and mentors and a program overview was developed. Recruitment initially focused on women from disadvantaged backgrounds, but also included general community members. Mentors were recruited from the local Anglican Church; Country Women’s Association (CWA) and included a retired home economics teacher. The local Anglican Church agreed to the use of their kitchen and cooking equipment.

Over a period of three months, eight sessions were facilitated by the DEW dietitian in conjunction with the mentors. Session topics included how to identify suitable healthy recipes, general healthy eating presentations and a supermarket tour. The participants also prepared, cooked, consumed and discussed meals in a group setting.

Findings from the pre- and post-program evaluation identified that the participants improved their skills, knowledge and confidence regarding healthy eating. The most notable and less expected outcome, however, was the positive shift in feelings of community involvement and socialisation. Mentors especially felt a bridge had been built between a generation gap and unexpected friendships formed.

To date, the Dungog Community Kitchen continues to be facilitated by the original mentors and members with minimal dietetic involvement. The program has further been adapted to suit the needs of the group to ensure ongoing sustainability. This has included babysitting by the local childcare centre, the establishment of a Facebook page and using fresh produce from the recently grown community garden.

Overall, the introduction of a community kitchen into the Shire of Dungog was a success and an alternative health model that increased the capacity of residents to improve their nutritional status with minimal input from dietetic services.