‘Losing it—in the bush’: a partnership to support rural communities

Dianne Penberthy1, Jane Newman1
1Mid North Coast Local Health District

‘Losing it—in the bush’ (LIITB) empowers small and isolated rural communities populations (<5000 people) to take action to improve their own health in partnership with their community. LIITB is a locally developed program empowering rural people living in the Port Macquarie Hastings Local Government Area to make healthy lifestyle changes to reduce their risk of acquiring and the complications from chronic disease. A partnership between nine rural communities, Port Macquarie Community Health (PMCH), Port Macquarie Hastings Council and At My Pace Specialist Rehabilitation, the program operates out of seven rural halls. Funding for this program was through the NSW Health Healthy Community Council Grants 2010–11. Each venue received exercise equipment, which is theirs to keep. The Rural Primary Health Service developed a twelve-week program that runs in each venue. Sessions are two hours per week, including an exercise component and a presentation on healthy lifestyle by PMCH professionals. Professionals include: dietician, health promotion, women’s health, mental health and occupational therapy. The program promotes existing national health programs; Measure Up, Get Healthy Telephone Line, Swap It Don’t Stop It, and the Heart Foundation Walking Groups Program. The Rural Adversity Mental Health Program has built capacity into this program by providing education and funding health days on mental health and wellbeing. This is a preventative and interventional model to tackle health issues associated with inactivity and poor nutrition. Participants lost weight, gained strength and flexibility, lost centimetres off their waist and increased their cardio fitness as a result of the program. Feedback from participants showed overwhelmingly the sense of fun they had as a group. Most communities continue to do some group exercise following completion of the program.

All participants (n=149) achieved increases in flexibility (89% and 80%); agility (20%); strength (14% and 20%) and cardiovascular fitness (19%). A combined loss of 2.5 metres in waist measurements is astounding.

This program is sustained through the establishment of local walking groups and the equipment is left in each hall for the community to use.

Take home message:

- ‘You don’t have to do a lot of exercise to feel so much better and more energetic.’

- How vital to good health is having fun, making new friends and enjoyed the sense of community.