What soap is to the body, laughter is to good health

Mary-Jane Honner*

*Royal Flying Doctor Service Central Operations

There is a romantic notion of RFDS is a Dr flying out and providing retrieval medicine however RFDS Central Operations provides primary health care to a number of rural Australians across both SA and NT including mental health and healthy living programs.

Diabetes is Australia’s fastest growing chronic disease, with one person diagnosed every six minutes. An estimated 275 Australians develop diabetes every day. The 2005 Australian AusDiab Follow-up study (Australian Diabetes, Obesity and Lifestyle Study) showed that 1.7 million Australians have diabetes but that up to half of the cases of type 2 diabetes remain undiagnosed. By 2031 it is estimated that 3.3 million Australians will have been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. (Vos et al., 2004).

The trend is more concerning in country areas where rates of mortality, as a result of diabetes are two to four times higher than in Australian cities. The greater burden of diabetes in the rural areas may be attributed to the social determinants of health. Simple lifestyle modifications have been found to be effective in reducing the risk or minimising the harm of diabetes.

One in five people experience depression at sometime during their life. Similarly one in ten Australian women will experience depression during pregnancy (ante-natal period and this increases to one in seven in post natal period. Anxiety is thought to be more common.

How do you effectively spread the health message addressing diabetes and depression to rural Australians? The opportunity presented to RFDS Central Operations was to tour two HealthPlays, to deliver a health message via a comedy. The aim was to provide an alternative non-confronting method of delivering a health message and raise the awareness of diabetes and depression and ways it may be prevented to people out in the bush.

The tours were successful in terms of the number of people attending and participation in the question and answer sessions post plays.

Did the plays make people laugh yes, however can a good giggle be interpreted as an audience understanding the key health messages enough to seek a health check up and or make changes to their lifestyle?

The challenge was how to best evaluate the impact of the HealthPlays and ensure the results were meaningful for further service planning and ways to promote health messages in rural and remote areas where people are time poor.

This paper shares the story of touring two HealthPlays in rural areas of both South Australia and Northern Territory. It tells of the challenges and the generosity of rural communities in delivering and receiving primary health services.

Results from the evaluations of the HealthPlays were inconclusive in terms of measuring behavioural change however audiences indicated a greater awareness of minimising the risk and or managing both diabetes and depression.

The HealthPlays provided a laugh and it is proven that a good giggle has a number of benefits including reducing stress, its proven to be better than a bar of chocolate and a hearty belly laugh will produce a nice six pack, as a 100 smiles is equivalent to slogging away on the treadmill for 15 minutes!