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Mental health and wellbeing promotion through Australian rural football clubs—a qualitative descriptive study

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Introduction

Suicide rates in rural populations throughout Australia are alarmingly high, almost twice as high as city counterparts. In rural communities, football clubs are often seen as the 'hub' of the community and are being explored as an avenue to deliver mental health and wellbeing promotion to their members and supporters. For programs to be effective for rural communities, it is crucial to identify what might help or hinder implementation.

Aim

To explore the barriers and enablers for promoting mental health and wellbeing through rural football clubs.

Method

This qualitative descriptive study included 12 individuals who were senior members of 10 rural football clubs affiliated with the South Australian National Football League. Recruitment occurred through email and phone contact with club secretaries and presidents. Semi-structured telephone interviews explored mental health and wellbeing issues experienced by football club members, previous involvement of clubs with mental wellbeing programs, and potential enablers and barriers for future program delivery. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically.

Results

Thematic analysis identified three themes: (1) more than a football club, (2) attitudes towards mental health, and (3) what is needed to implement a program. The third theme had subthemes of resources, importance of timing, financial support and sponsorship and mental health initiatives that have been implemented by clubs. Major enablers participants reported included the important role the football club serves socially in the community, the inclusion of speakers with credibility in the football community, and making the program engaging, for example, through the use of real-life scenarios. Key barriers identified included difficulty getting people involved due to individual attitudes towards mental health, and not having the finances or resources available to implement a program. Participants recognised the importance of programs that promote mental health and wellbeing for their communities.

Discussion

These findings provide some valuable information to inform the development and design of mental health and wellbeing programs delivered through football clubs. Firstly, they highlight the importance of involving the club in decisions regarding program target groups, content and scheduling. Participatory action research (PAR) is one approach that could be used to help facilitate this, as it gives decision making power to those who are going to be most affected by the program. By involving a football club(s) in all stages of the project, including program design, implementation and evaluation, they may be more likely to display ownership of and commitment to the program. Readiness to receive information and advice on mental health is another important consideration and this study highlighted the varying attitudes towards mental health issues within football clubs. Furthermore, it is vital programs address rural community concerns associated with mental health including stigma and less assurance of confidentiality. Participants indicated that real life examples would assist with program engagement, including inclusion of guest speakers or facilitators who have lived experience with mental health issues, particularly of someone with standing in the football club community. To ensure program success, outside (of the club) support from key stakeholders of assistance accessing local grants and sponsorship will be important for program delivery. Ongoing sustainability of funding and program goals and outcomes should be considered during the program development stage. Finally, programs should be evidence-based and include piloting and evaluation to ensure that they achieve the best outcomes for rural communities.

Conclusion

The findings from this study will inform the development of a mental wellbeing program to be delivered via rural football clubs by providing insight into factors which may impact on community engagement and program effectiveness.

Presenter

Heidi Hutchesson is a final year Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (Honours) student at the University of South Australia. Heidi grew up in a small rural community in South Australia and throughout her life has enjoyed being a member of sporting clubs. Heidi has always been interested in rural health and how rural communities can work together to address some of the health disparities impacting on rural people.