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Delivering a mental wellbeing program through local rural football clubs

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Introduction/rationale

Suicide rates in rural Australia are 40 per cent higher than those of major cities with men being at greatest risk ¹. Social determinants impacting on the health of males in rural communities include higher risk taking behaviour, higher unemployment, increased vulnerability to natural disasters, greater apprehension around seeking help and 'rural stoicism' ^{1,2}. Inequitable access to health services adds further complications. People living in rural communities have 25 per cent less access to psychological service than those living in major cities ^{1,2}. To address the unique factors impacting on males in rural Australia, we need to embrace the positive aspects of living in rural areas, including higher social cohesion and community participation ². Sporting clubs are believed to have an important role in building social capital by providing opportunities for social support, participation and achievement ³⁻⁵.

Objectives

The objective of this paper is to describe two University of South Australia occupational therapy student led participatory community practice projects in Whyalla South Australia, exploring the delivery of a mental wellbeing program through a local rural football club.

Approach

The projects were nine-weeks in duration with students working in partnership with South Whyalla Football Club and local community health and support services. The first project, in 2017, was a comprehensive needs analysis investigating the health issues experienced by men in the community and whether the delivery of a program through the football club would be acceptable and feasible. The students immersed themselves in club activities, attended training/game days and volunteered in the club kitchen etc. A reference group was formed to assist with guiding the project and included representatives from the playing group and club committee. Information about the community need was gathered through a survey and through informal conversations with club members. The comprehensive needs analysis indicated that strategies to assist with mental wellbeing was the primary need and that the delivery of strategies through the club would be acceptable and feasible. The club expressed an interest in hosting another project to build on this work. In 2018, the students re-confirmed the need and worked in close collaboration with the club and community services

(including Head Space, the Suicide Prevention Network and the Primary Health Network) to plan two events. The first event was a family fun day held during one of the football games, where local services set up stalls to increase awareness of mental wellbeing supports. Fun activities including a barbeque, jumping castle and games were provided to encourage family participation. The second event was a social evening at the football club where two presenters discussed their lived experience with mental health issues. An informal approach was taken with food and music provided. Approximately 80 people attended the evening.

Implications

As part of the project process students were asked to consider community driven sustainability strategies, with two projects planned for 2019: 1) a community wide project in partnership with a local Whyalla men's mental health support group (I Am Not Afraid to Talk, INATT) who were key stakeholders in the 2018 project; 2) and a project working with another nearby rural football league (Port Lincoln) to develop and implement mental wellbeing strategies based on this communities unique needs. In addition, a recent project (January 2019) has been undertaken by a University of South Australia occupational therapy and psychology student to develop a practical resource that can be used by community clubs (in partnership with local health and community services) to implement mental wellbeing strategies.

From a research perspective a qualitative descriptive research study was undertaken alongside the 2018 student led project to evaluate the outcomes for the students and the club. This is now at the data analysis stage with plans to publish this in the near future.

Conclusion

The occupational therapy student led participatory community practice projects have demonstrated that local rural sporting clubs provide an important means of promoting men's mental wellbeing, with communities expressing a desire to continue to build on the strategies implemented.

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Presenter

Dr Jocelyn Kernot is a lecturer in the Occupational Therapy Program at the University of South Australia. Her research interests is in the promotion of physical and mental health and wellbeing for children and adults with a particular interest in rural health. Jocelyn's teaching involves coordinating and supervising Masters Entry Occupational Therapy Participatory Community Practice Projects. Jocelyn is keen to improve the mental wellbeing of men in rural areas and initiated two occupational therapy student project in Whyalla, South Australia, to explore the delivery of a mental wellbeing program through local football clubs.