Pit Stop: Gentlemen Check your Engines!

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A SPANNER IN THE WORKS

Heard a crunching noise in the gear box, then the motor started to miss and then it seized all together!

Mate, that’s tragic! Did you take a look under the bonnet?

No, too far gone for that, had to take it to the garage. Cost an arm and a leg, not to mention being off the road. I should have kept the maintenance up and saved myself the trouble.

A plausible if not “blokey” conversation about a vehicle. What if the topic of conversation was replaced with health? The conversation would then become less plausible, unblokey and not so common.

Findings today indicate that men are the lowest users of preventative health services, have been described as the sickest group in society after Aborigines and are more likely to die from all selected causes than women.1-5 Only a small proportion of these differences can be attributed to genetic factors and these are less important than adverse lifestyle factors adopted by males5. Indeed there is a growing recognition of the importance of social factors, such as norms associated with masculinity, lifestyle, health habits and propensity to seek treatment5.

In other words, men don’t generally conduct regular preventative maintenance and certainly aren’t likely to take themselves to a garage (health service) until it becomes serious. They do not talk candidly about the health of their own vehicles, their bodies, even to other men. Whilst talking about vehicles is “blokey”, talking about your health is not and is seen as a sign of weakness.

HEADS UNDER THE BONNET

So, how to engage men in health? The solution was stumbled upon when Gascoyne Public Health was invited to participate in a horticultural field day run by Elders. Historically these events had been pamphlet stands manned by very serious health professionals boned up on the latest State or Federal campaign and message. On this occasion it was a valuable opportunity to access men and to do so effectively would require something “seriously” creative.

This opportunity presented itself at a point in time where Gascoyne Public Health and Compari Drug Service were developing hunches and gathering evidence that employing intuitive and creative approaches to presenting health information and making them a part of lifestyle events could be an effective means of engaging members of the community. The unit/team had already produced a lifestyle
pantomime, with an “Eat well, Think well, Be well” message, a series of soapy radio advertisements and an interactive health maze. The next lifestyle event was the Blue Light Drag Races run by the police, which had attracted some 2500 people, a record for a Carnarvon event. The bank of “Smoke It, Drop the clutch and Gun it lights” were the proverbial light bulb turning on. In health and social science terms it was the adoption of an appreciative enquiry approach. In psychological terms it was mental mapping. To take a concept that was familiar, comfortable and that worked for men, vehicles and build a health package around it.

THE DRIVING FORCE

In developing the concept, a mixture of recognised principles, research, hunches and first hand experience in a rural setting were drawn upon.

♦ Men in general seem to relate to mechanical concepts and understand the importance of regular maintenance.

♦ The prominence and importance of the role of the vehicle. Men cannot work, socialise, recreate and some say procreate without a vehicle in rural and remote areas!

♦ Decisions about actions are coloured by ideas about appropriate masculine and feminine behaviours and health messages should reflect this.6

♦ Mobile health promotion campaigns have been found to improve access for men and find them more willing to discuss intimate personal detail.7

♦ The majority of attendees at Men’s health clinics are middle aged, affluent and advantaged.8

♦ Non health settings for health information decrease the stigma associated with being unwell.7

♦ Recommendations have been made to more clearly delineate the impact of maleness on and help develop more supportive environments to modify these behaviours.9

♦ In other research respondents referred to the production of health requiring body maintenance and references were rife with mechanistic metaphors, reflecting a mechanistic industrial work oriented approach to health.6

♦ Men place an emphasis on the inner body relating to function and capacity as opposed to women who refer to health in external terms.6

BUILDING THE ENGINE

Combining these points gave rise to the Pit Stop, a series of standard men’s health screening tests, housed within a mechanical metaphor.
Nuts and bolts
The main body of the package consists of the tests:

- blood pressure — oil levels
- flexibility — torsion
- alcohol intake — fuel additives
- hip to waist ratio — chassis check
- skin cancer — duco
- smoking — exhaust
- lung function — air filter
- testicular cancer — spark plugs
- relevant health resources for each test.

Accessories
The remainder of the package consists of support material in the form of:

- Guide
  - To support the tests and make the concept replicable, a series of instructions on how to run a Pit Stop

- Resources
  - Support materials for the testing such as stickers and word order sheets.

- Media /Publicity
  - Media releases, radio and press advertisements to promote men’s health and the screening

- Evaluation
  - Fundamentals for gathering quantitative data

Workshop procedure
In brief, the Pit Stop procedure is as follows:

- Participants register, and contact details are taken if they agree to be followed up.
- Participants move through each test.
- Results are recorded on a “work order sheet”
- Each test has a fail or pass criterion.
- Upon completion of the testing, the participant’s performance is checked.
- A yellow or registration sticker and a male maintenance kit are awarded to the participant.

At the scene of the testing several strategies were developed to support the mechanical concept.

- Mechanical equipment is borrowed from automotive businesses/ motor shops to display and create a mechanical environment for the testing.
- Testing crew wear overalls.
The Pit Stop is still in a relatively formative stage and hasn’t been formally evaluated due to practical considerations faced by most rural practitioners. Despite this lack of formal evaluation the adaptive nature of the package, the overwhelmingly positive qualitative feedback received, and simply the fact that the target group have been engaged, speak to its effectiveness. How do you quantify the “Kleenex factor”?

In terms of formal evaluation requirements the package contains the fundamentals for gathering quantitative data from the screening results. Once the men have been engaged it is open for the user of the package to design the evaluation required according to their needs.

During screenings conducted in the Gascoyne of approximately 300 men, practical qualitative findings have been noted.

♦ The mechanical concept sparks conversation amongst men as to which part of the body correlates to which engine part and appears to be an effective mechanism with which to engage men in a playful way to discuss various aspects of their health.

♦ Testing crew in overalls spruik for men to put themselves over the Pits. This challenge plays an important role in engaging men. Participants have been eager to compare their performance to that of their mates. This banter allows men to interact with the testing crew.

♦ A range of health professionals is able to take part as testing crew. To date doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, dieticians, health promotion officers and drug and alcohol workers have all participated. This has had an added benefit, in that it has provided an enjoyable opportunity for health workers to work together, building morale within the health service and allowing direct contact away from a health setting for participants and health workers. It is interesting to note that the Gascoyne Health service is now willing to roster nurses to work on Pit Stop in a community setting.

♦ Pit Stop would appear to be an excellent setting for brief intervention. Men appear to be honest in reporting their levels of alcohol consumption and have been able to discuss health matters in detail.

♦ Pit Stop is taken to where men are, field days, drag races etc. Removing the stigma and waiting time associated with a traditional health setting.

♦ The screening is labour intensive; however, an average of 30 men can be screened over a four to five hour period.

As the Pit Stop has been implemented observations and feedback received have given rise to the consideration of further additions to the concept.
Workshop
A Pit Stop workshop is to be developed by Gascoyne Health Service. This will allow issues identified in the screening to be addressed by a workshop co-ordinator, under the same mechanical concept. In line with current literature the workshop will be operated from a non health setting and with the aim of creating a place for peer support, education, and frank discussion.

Shock absorber
Critical to any vehicle’s capacity to perform well are its capacity to brake, steer and absorb the trials and tribulations of our vast network of roads. The literature of the last twenty years supports this view with the indication that relationships, intimacy and belonging are better predictors of male well being than clinical indices.10–13

In other words, whilst correctly gapped spark plugs, oil pressure and fuel air mix may start the motor it is thought, action and relationships that preserve, steer and protect the motor.

To acknowledge this a Shock Absorber test is to be developed. This test will ask questions about the significant relationship in the participant’s life and aim to increase awareness amongst the target group of its role in health.

Engine doctor
A General Practitioner element that will take the mechanical concept into the GP surgery will be explored and attempt to target the perceived barriers that men hold in relation to seeing their doctor.

On the open road
The package is currently under production to allow it to be available for use by other health groups/ service providers as a part of their own men’s health initiatives. A catalyst or engaging tool from which, or into which they develop their own holistic men’s health program.

REVVING UP
In summary, Pit Stop is a mobile men’s health package that relies upon the tenet of seeking out places where men are. It aims to meet the perception of rural males through the reassurance of the screening challenge, to use the principles of primary care and health promotion to maintain physical specifications at an optimum level and to develop self-esteem, community connectedness and social support. In line with recommendations for addressing the state of Men’s health5, Pit Stop should not be seen as a stand alone screening tool, but as a catalyst and an engaging mechanism to take men further down the path to addressing their own health issues. While there is value in the results of the specific tests, the greater value is two fold. The engagement capacity of the concept creates a lead point into established health services, a Pied Piper effect and second, it provides a framework for men to acknowledge their own maintenance needs.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Global mechanics

During the development of the Pit Stop, there has been recognition of a growing global, or more accurately, an Australian consciousness of mechanical references in Men’s health. There seems to be recognition that it is less threatening and a more enjoyable way to attract men to health. Public Health and Compari see value in collaborating with this wave, in building upon it and the inherent opportunity to develop new partnerships in sponsorship. Having a “Monro”, a quality shock absorber to develop resilience, in other words a person with whom males develop resilience may enter the Australian vernacular!

Other recommendations from the Pit Stop experience for rural health specifically, would highlight the importance of the use of humour and entertainment. Two vital ingredients that tend to get lost sight of in the quest for quantifiable outcomes. They are, however, vital to engaging people. Health Promotion is generally trying to reach and preach to the non converted ensuring some resistance. Humour is a softener, puts people more at ease and has the added bonus of improving the morale of rural health practitioners.

A vital skill employed in creating Pit Stop was intuition. While models and analytical frameworks provide a working base, the best ideas come from gut instinct and knowing and being part of the community. This also ties into Social Capital. Gascoyne Public Health and Compari invested in the community, through providing entertainment and becoming involved in community events before a two way give and take relationship could be established.

The importance of creating initiatives at a local level was also highlighted. Rural residents are different to city dwellers, they have a particular lived reality which may be different from region to region. Indeed those health regions which have expressed an interest in Pit Stop, have vehicles at the core of their existence, be it their remoteness, their agriculture, or their social life, Speedway, Field Days, Mining Expos and the like. The needs and interests of vigneron, orchardists and fishermen may well be different. Push for funding and have the confidence to create health programs at a local level. Most importantly, have fun doing it!

REFERENCES


**AUTHORS**

Elsa Alston is the Regional Health Promotion Officer at the Gascoyne Public Health Unit in Carnarvon, Western Australia. She is a graduate from Curtin University. Elsa has been Regional Health Promotion Officer to the Gascoyne region for the last 5 years. As a regional position the responsibilities and experience cover the whole range of health promotion issues. Elsa took the move to a rural area one step further and married a pastoralist. She is currently living on Yanrey Station, a million acres of isolation, sheep, cattle and spinifex and working from home two days a week while on maternity leave. Elsa is passionate about bringing creativity and enjoyment to rural health promotion.

Chris Hall is the Gascoyne Co-ordinator of COMPARI Community Drug Services Team. Chris has extensive experience in education, mental health and alcohol and other drugs in this remote part of Western Australia, with a particular interest is “lived reality” — the way people interact and perceive their lives and the impact that has on their total well-being. To this end Chris Hall is the co-author of PIT STOP an innovative men’s health package, and has written and directed two lifestyle pantomimes, Cinderella with a Twist and The Impossible Dream. Recent papers include The Cheeky Environment, Australian Pacific Healthy Cities Conference, 2000 and Innovations in Brief Intervention for Men, Healthy Responses Conference, Western Australia.