

STRENGTHENING MENS HEALTH AND WELLBEING THROUGH COMMUNITY SHEDS

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"All Australian boys need a shed; a place where he can go, somewhere to clear his head..."

Australian country singer John Williamson's lyrics reflect the simple idea that is gaining support across Australia, particularly in helping to decrease social isolation and the health issues to which it can lead. The backyard shed is part of the Australian culture and regarded as a 'blokes' space.

But, what about the men who don't have a shed?

That's where the idea of a community shed emerged and it became the basis of the Australian Men's Shed movement.

The Men's Shed movement

The Australian Men's Shed Association (AMSA) was founded in 2007. There are approximately 820 Sheds across the country with a total of around 100,000 members. While less than half the Sheds are in rural areas, there are more rural than metropolitan members. The Men's Shed movement is also spreading internationally with both Ireland and New Zealand hosting their first Men's Shed conferences this year.

Most of the men involved in Men's Sheds are retired, as highlighted in research conducted by Golding (2011) who found Men's Shed members were typically older males without a current work-based identity.

They are usually in the process of one or more difficult transitions, in terms of work or retirement, relationships with partner, children or family, health issues or financial status.

Golding concluded Men's Sheds engage older Australian men because sheds are familiar, attractive and culturally iconic, particularly if men have spent much of their younger years working 'hands-on'.

Each Men's Shed develops its own rules and guidelines. The success of the concept lies in the adaptable nature of the Sheds, where the members decide on what activities the Shed will offer and how it is run, with assistance from AMSA.

The types of activities differ from Shed to Shed, but manual labour is a feature, including woodwork or metalwork, gardening or community projects. Some Sheds have a few young men being mentored by the older men and learning new work and life skills. Other Sheds will have areas

where men can learn cooking or how to use the internet to stay in touch with their families.

Online Shed community

While the 'physical' Men's Sheds have continued to grow in members, sites and popularity, a way was needed to help men who didn't have a Men's Shed in their area. The move to an online Shed platform was also supported by anecdotal evidence and feedback that men in growing numbers were gaining health information online and participating in online discussion groups.

In November 2010, The Shed Online website (www.theshedonline.org.au) was established as a joint collaboration between AMSA, *beyondblue* and the Movember Foundation to provide an online virtual Shed community where men can socialise and exchange ideas.

Just like the physical Men's Sheds, the Shed Online is a place for men to work on projects and share tips and advice. The Shed Online now has 4,000 registered members and is the biggest Men's Shed in Australia. There have been more than 170,000 hits to the website and 7,000 posts have been written since its launch.

When men visit the Shed Online, they experience open and supportive discussions on a variety of topics – from cooking to jokes, DIY projects to travel, and mental health to hobbies. People write about their personal experiences and receive support from 'online mates' who have been through similar situations and provide advice on any matter or issue, be it shed-related or life-related. Often, people who are concerned about their partners, family members and friends, seek advice online for ways to help them.

The Benefits of Men's Shed

Currently, there are limited studies evaluating the benefits of the Men's Shed movement.

Research undertaken by Hayes and Williamson (2006) accords with *beyondblue's* anecdotal evidence, finding four major benefits of Men's Sheds: decreasing social isolation, enhancing self esteem, increasing access to specific information about health, and providing a mediating structure between the 'everyday world of men' and the health care system.

Decreasing social isolation

beyondblue emphasises the importance of remaining socially connected throughout one's life to help reduce one of the known risk factors for becoming depressed. A meaningful social network also protects against social isolation and loneliness in later life. Social isolation has been shown to predict an increase in morbidity and mortality (House, 2001), with the associated risks being comparable to cigarette smoking and other major biomedical and psychosocial risk factors (Warburton & Lui, 2007).

Research by Ballinger, Talbot and Verrinder (2009) found that a well-equipped Men's Shed workshop may have been the initial engager, but the social aspects of the Shed fostered regular participation and ongoing engagement. This leads to development of positive relationships and a sense of belonging to something that is worthwhile and positive. It provides participants with a place in which they feel they can be useful, share common activities and socialise with other men.

Golding (2011) found that Men's Sheds in community settings 'tick many of the boxes' in terms of the determinants of health for men beyond paid work, without patronising them as clients, students, customers or patients. He describes Men's Sheds as "an innovative, powerful and positive social intervention, particularly for men struggling with changes in their working, social and personal lives as they age".

Enhancing self esteem

The loss of identity when men retire is a major factor in the transition from employment to retirement and can affect self esteem. Once men have left the workforce, they need to find other ways of identifying themselves within the community and they need to have a sense of purpose.

Ballinger (2009) found that Men's Sheds can provide a satisfying activity for men who wish to pursue work-type activities without the constraints or expectations of paid work.

Ormsby, Stanley and Jaworski (2010) found Shed participants described their sense of achievement and satisfaction in terms of their ability to contribute and be part of something that benefits the community. The men become empowered to face challenges presented at the Sheds, which helps maintain their identities. The opportunity for regular, social interaction and hands-on activity in groups, within organisations and the community is particularly powerful, therapeutic and likely to have broader wellbeing benefits.

Improvement in self esteem is more difficult to measure, but the aim of connecting with other people via the physical or online Shed is to ensure people's needs are validated. Men's self esteem can be boosted by participating in a peer group and having their voices heard.

Increasing access to health information

Research shows that men are less likely than women to seek help for health problems, and also less likely to use health care services. To get health information to men, organisations like *beyondblue* need to reach men within their comfort zones, so partnering with AMSA and getting information into Men's Sheds is an effective method.

beyondblue has been providing information stands and resources to Men's Sheds since 2008. There has been strong feedback, backed by survey data,

showing that easy access to resources has been useful in communicating with this traditionally hard-to-reach group.

A survey conducted by *beyondblue* in 2011 found that 65 per cent of participants said having an information stand at their Shed was useful.

Around one-third of the posts on the Shed Online focus on health or mental health concerns. There are many questions posted on the site which could be perceived to be 'embarrassing'. This may be because people may be too uncomfortable to talk about it in person with their partner or their GP, making an online forum a great place to ask the question.

The Shed Online provides information and links on 18 different health topics including health conditions such as diabetes and cancer, principles for good health such as sleeping well and being active, and emotional issues such as maintaining positive relationships.

Mediating structure to the healthcare system

Men's Sheds provide a 'health by stealth' process where men absorb the messages, but aren't being forced to deal with health professionals. Stories abound about people who say the Men's Shed has saved their life because they have been able to discuss health problems and other issues.

The AMSA aims to get health services and local Men's Sheds working together in a mutually beneficial relationship, so health services can interact with this population group on its own terms.

Golding (2011) found the most important thing about the Shed movement is that collectively men have a say over what happens in the Shed, so that if service providers or therapists want to work through the Sheds, the men have the ultimate say over whether, how, when and where they might (or might not) be involved.

Golding also found that Shed members wanted to learn how to stay fit and healthy, and acknowledged that the participation itself was health promoting. Importantly, the fact that the location is called a Men's Shed and not a *learning, wellbeing or health* centre was found to be important in attracting and engaging many men who would otherwise not get involved in a community organisation, and who were likely to be in the greatest need in terms of their health and wellbeing.

Conclusions

The Men's Shed movement is a new and dynamic way to engage with older men and is already having success in improving health and wellbeing. There is also a great deal of promise for how this movement can improve men's mental health outcomes.

As well as the health outcomes, there are many reasons to consider why the Men's Shed movement is important on social and community levels.

More work and evaluation research needs to be carried out on the benefits of the movement, and *beyondblue* is keen to contribute to this evidence base.

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