

2007 TheMHS Conference

4-7 September 2007



IT'S NOT often that you get agreement on the highlights of a conference. But for this year's **TheMHS** Melbourne conference, there was almost complete unanimity: the quality of presentations, the presence for the four days of the ABC's Andrew Denton and the *Enough Rope* team, the engaging keynote speakers and the singing—lots of it from the start to the finale performance from the Choir of Hardknocks—were highlights of this year's conference time.

Conference Director, Vivienne Miller says total attendance was just over 1,500 and, with 1,000 a day for four days at the Melbourne Exhibition & Conference Centre, she rates it as the most successful in the conference's 17-year history. There were nearly 100 sessions and about 300 presentations.

The Keynote address from Til Wykes on the opening day set the tone for the following days. Her reference to Donald Rumsfeld's "known knowns, known unknowns and unknown unknowns" in convincing the conference its what the researcher thinks that matters and what they ask and how they do it engaged even the most cynical of conference goers.

Another of the keynotes, Mary O'Hagan, questioned the orthodox views by unapologetically insisting that madness is a legitimate human experience. As evidence, she flashed up an advert from her archives for Lithium which argued that since composer George Frideric Handel was bipolar, he would have benefited from a course of the same even if it killed his huge bursts of creativity!

Creativity was particularly evident in the outdoor adventure sessions. Taking 12 young people with challenging behaviours to the outback is a challenge in itself, but it's just as challenging to organise the event and secure the involvement of other professional skills. These adventures proved to the Richmond Fellowship (Victoria) that young people learn best by doing, especially when the doing is fun, engaging and self-directed. Another really innovative program was a cycling program in a rural community. Using re-cycled bikes (pardon the pun), the participants learned a lot of life skills, got fit, got mobile, and got better self-esteem.

Andrew Denton and the *Enough Rope* team injected a new dimension to the dual concepts of socialising and conferencing. He recorded over a dozen interviews over the four days, talking to consumers, carers and mental health professionals, and in the breaks he engaged freely with anyone who wanted to talk to him. For those who wanted a platform and weren't interviewed, they could slip down the stairs to the Me TV booth that *Enough Rope* had set up to record their ten minutes to camera without let or hindrance. The results of their 40 hours of filming and 35 hours from the Me TV booth will go to air on *Enough Rope*, possibly on 3 December 2007. But keep your eye out for the pre-publicity and don't on any account miss it. Who knows: you may be in it!

For those who felt overcome by the sheer volume of the presentations, the workshop on the theory and practice of cognitive therapy and mindfulness

meditation would have been a welcome relief. But they would have also been able to judge if this therapy would be a useful adjunct to their service and if they should consider being trained in the techniques.

And then there was the music and the singing: the consumer and carers set the tone if not the key in the preconference forum when they raised their 400 voices in unison to declare "We're all just a little mad". Mary O'Hagan certainly agreed with them as she reminded the conference to "Look on the bright side of life." And the Choir of Hard Knocks did just that for the closing act.

Indeed, as Gerard Reed of the Melbourne organising committee, said, "The Melbourne conference will be remembered as the place where the word 'mad' was reclaimed for legitimate general use."

That's what the 2008 TheMHS Conference in Auckland (4-7 Sept) has to compete with! ✕

From the TheMHS committee

MHACA's Rangi Ponga, Tim MacDonald and Darren Farr were fortunate to attend this year's TheMHS conference. A photo album (with comments) has been completed and is available for viewing @ MHACA in the recreation room.

2007 TheMHS Conference

... some interviews



IN SEPTEMBER 2007 two staff and one consumer attended the annual THEMHS conference in Melbourne.

Darren Farr is a Consumer Representative on the MHACA Management Committee and, while at the conference, he interviewed a few people to get some insights into co-morbidity. Here Darren shares part of his interviews ...

Interview with Bill MacDonald:

Hello, my name's Bill MacDonald. I work in the mental health branch in Victoria who's responsibility is service planning and development of mental health and, increasingly, alcohol and drug services.

Anxiety and depression and alcohol are known to occur together on a fairly frequent basis and, although they not necessarily causative of each other, they should always be responded to in an integrated kind of way. One of the big problems with what's been happening in Victoria—and more broadly across the country—is that mental health services and drug and alcohol services have been too separate; and so when people come along with two problems like this at the same time they get bounced between one service and the other and quite often can fall between the cracks.

So our main push at the moment—which has been really taken up by consumers and carers and service providers—is trying to get a 'no-wrong door' policy. This means that if somebody has a mental health problem and drug and alcohol problem—dual diagnosis—then they can get help from entering a service which is a dual-diagnosis drug and alcohol or mental health service.

We've seen this is requiring significant service change, so we're hoping that staff working in mental health services and drug and alcohol services will become what we call 'dual-diagnosis capable.' This means that they're able to recognise and respond to people with either problem and hopefully provide people with these problems with a far more integrated, high quality service than they currently get.

Interview with Colin Reeves:

Hi, I'm Colin Reeves. I'm a psychiatrist and director of a centre that primarily works with families, and also teaches people about working with families and also does research.

I agree with everything Bill said. I think that alcohol obviously starts off as being a coping strategy. It actually helps people manage, but very quickly, like many coping strategies, it comes with its own kind of baggage, its own kind of consequences. The difficulty is when you begin to use alcohol as a way of managing; it starts to take over and ultimately what that does is the person begins to lose themselves. In fact, alcohol is a way of hiding away from yourself.

So, for me, the solution is to try to find an alternative way to face yourself and that probably ultimately means people need to put alcohol to one side ... and pills to one side ... and deal with whatever it is that alcohol is masking or helping you not face. That's actually pretty challenging and it often takes a lot of support.

So you need people around you. You need family around you. And you need

inspiration as well ... and you basically need to feel like you're running the show.

So these are the kind of principles we work on; and with all those kinds of things going on hopefully it can all happen for you.

Interviews by Darren Farr

2008 TheMHS Conference



2-5 September Auckland, NZ

Consumer Funding to Attend

MHACA is again funding a consumer to attend this years TheMHS conference on 2-5 September in Auckland, New Zealand. To apply, please write 1/2 a page on why you would like to attend and how this could be of benefit to other consumers.

For more information
visit Rangi Ponga or phone
Rangi on 8950 4602.