

19th TheMHS Conference 1-4 Sept 2009 ... Perth Convention Centre

You, Your Family, Your Community, Your Mental Health: The Path Ahead



by Rita Riedel

On 2-4 September I attended the 19th TheMHS conference held at the Perth Convention Centre together with Consumer Forum representative Paul Birchall. It was an exciting place to be because, for the first time, TheMHS joined with the WA Transcultural Mental Health Conference & the Australasian Refugee Health Conference to run these three conferences side-by-side. In line with the theme of TheMHS this year, this event aimed to “link concepts of the interrelatedness of individuals, families and communities, providing connections which can strengthen and support mental health and wellbeing.”

Keynote speeches ...

Two of the keynote speeches I particularly valued were by Prof. Judy Atkinson and Dr Rufus May. Head of Gnibi College of Indigenous Australian Peoples, Southern Cross University, Judy's talk was “Generational Trauma as a Stressor in Aboriginal Health & Wellbeing: Generational Healing – What We Have Learnt is What We Can Teach,” which provided insight into a complex issue. Judy identified trauma in Aboriginal families and communities as human experiences that go beyond the individual psychology of traumatic stress reaction (TSR) or PTSD, into complex, whole of family-community experiences, where too often the known world no longer feels or is safe. She also outlined healing responses to generational trauma (historic, social and cultural), located in skilled practitioners who are culturally competent and safe in their work practice, who engage with the multi-layered distress of individuals, families and communities. As one of Judy's slides highlighted – ‘under anger is always grief.’ **For further information contact Prof. Atkinson at judy.atkinson@scu.edu.au or visit www.scu.edu.au/schools/gnibi**

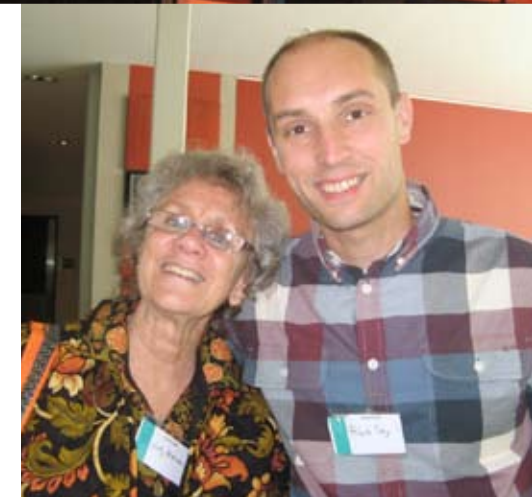
Better known as ‘the doctor who hears voices’, UK clinical psychologist Dr Rufus May gave a great speech on the power of working with voices, “The Spirit of Recovery.” A man who radiates calmness and integrity, Rufus shared insights from his personal experiences of recovery (as well as his work helping others) on working with extreme states of mind and using them as guides to emotional and social recovery. Rather than pathologising voices or trying to get rid of them, he believes in working ‘with’ people's voices, recycling them and seeing them as ‘difficult friends we need to learn from’. Not unlike CBT, voice dialogue involves conversing with a person's voices to understand the individual's life experiences and the voices' motives, and is based on principles of acceptance, deep looking and creative expression. **For further information on Dr May's work as well as resources and training visit rufusmay.com**

Left: One of Judy's presentation slides

Living Libraries ...

One workshop that stood out for me was about a 2008 Mental Health Week activity put on by the WA Dept of Health's Mental Health Division (MHD) called “Living Libraries.” Adding a twist to traditional libraries, it involved people with a lived experience of mental illness as ‘living books,’ sharing their personal stories one-on-one with the ‘readers.’

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Prof. Judy Atkinson & Dr Rufus May





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With 20 minute time limits (to look after people's wellbeing), consumers were seated in several local libraries with an invitation to the general public to come and listen and learn and ask questions. One of the biggest barriers to mental illness is lack of awareness and understanding, and "Living Libraries" provided an excellent opportunity to raise awareness about mental health and counter the stigma attached to mental illness. 'Readers' were very non-judgemental and often moved by consumers' stories. One of the four presenters for this session was a consumer, who shared how doing this project increased her confidence and has inspired her to do further projects.

For further details contact Project Coordinator Cindy Chi, on 9222 0289 or email Cindy.Chi@health.wa.gov.au visit - www.melvillecity.com.au/facilities/libraries/mental-health-week-living-library-program ✕



One of the many artworks on display at the TheMHS Conference foyer - part of an exhibition put on by CECAT (the Creative Expression Centre for Arts Therapy)

Student Placement @ MHACA

I am a General Practitioner currently living on the Central Coast of NSW, 60km North of Sydney. I moved there from Alice Springs five years ago. For the past eight years I have lived with a serious chronic disease known as Primary Sjogren's Syndrome, which has meant that I haven't been able to work for the past five years. I have found being sick and not being able to work a struggle; however, I know how important it is to stay engaged with the things that give life meaning and purpose so I have continued to study for my Masters in Remote Health Practice. I have a passion for Australian Indigenous health so my study forms an important part of continuing to pursue this. However, my study is different now as I approach it as a person with many years experience of living with chronic disease and negotiating the sometimes unfriendly and hard to negotiate Australian Health System. I still hope to return to work in General Practice one day, in some capacity, in Indigenous Health.

My 2-week placement at MHACA in late November is part of a subject on Community Based Rehabilitation. It has given me a wonderful opportunity to see how a non-government organisation that is consumer driven works. My time here has given the study I am doing some flesh and bones and has been an invaluable experience for me. I have returned to Alice Springs where I have worked for the majority of my career as a GP, to do this placement with MHACA, because I am interested in mental health care and it has always played a major part in my work in the past. There is a dire need for a community controlled mental health rehabilitation service where I live on the Central Coast of NSW. This placement



GP Linda Samera, on a 2-week placement at MHACA for her Masters in Remote Health Practice

with MHACA has given me the opportunity to see how this essential gap in service delivery can be filled.

I have also come to this placement with some personal experience of mental illness. When I am very sick, Sjogren's Syndrome can attack my nerves, my heart, gut and joints, so I can't walk or move my arms. Sometimes I have had to be on very high doses of steroid to control the disease which can often have a very negative effect on mood, causing severe depression. It did this to me and I ended up on a journey through the Mental Health Unit on the Central Coast that I didn't expect. Chronic disease can be very isolating and disempowering, and often treatment and the medical system add to this. This was also my experience of the mental health service. There is nothing like MHACA on the Central Coast so I went back into my community with very little direction or support, which can be very disillusioning. So I guess now I carry my experience as a GP alongside my personal experience with illness into whatever I do. Part of my time at MHACA has been a personal journey of realising the bridge that exists between the two and seeing how valuable my experience with mental illness and chronic disease is.

MHACA's role in mental health care is vital and it has been a privilege to sit in with the staff and consumers to see how it all works together for the best of the community. Thank you so much for the generously donated time and experience, it is richly appreciated.

Linda Samera