



# from margins to mainstream ...

5th World Conference on the Promotion of Mental Health & the Prevention of Mental & Behavioral Disorders

10-12 September 2008

by Rita Riedel & Jo Ruby

*Margins to Mainstream explored new ways that individuals and organisations from a range of sectors can promote mental health and prevent mental illness. The conference attracted 860 people from 44 countries and provided over 370 presentations!*

THE AIM of the conference was to confirm that mental health promotion is no longer at the margins but rather firmly established in the mainstream research, policy and practice arenas—“Mental health is everybody’s business.” For example, creating and sustaining mental health is already part of the work some people do, such as increasing social participation through involving young people in the arts or reducing discrimination by making a sport more accessible for recent arrivals in our country.

The conference was designed to highlight four of the 14 key evidence-based determinants promoted by VicHealth which influence mental health and wellbeing (see page 46 for more details). Thus presentations fell into five main streams which were:

- ◆ Social Participation
- ◆ Discrimination & Diversity
- ◆ Violence
- ◆ Access to Economic Resources
- ◆ General

### Some key messages

- ◆ There is an enormous cost to the community from mental illness, particularly in the workforce
- ◆ We need to make mental health a core concern in schools and education

- ◆ Mental health is a mainstream responsibility: from schools to workplaces, from neighbourhoods to national governments.
- ◆ Social injustice is killing people on a grand scale (Fran Baum) and when inequality becomes too great the idea of community becomes impossible. (Raymond Ayers)
- ◆ The iceberg analogy - people’s behaviour/illness is the tip above the water, and societal structures/systems the iceberg below - we have to look at bigger underlying structures and not just focus on people’s illness/behaviours
- ◆ The way we treat each other has a profound effect on people’s mental health – kindness not cruelty, compassion not judgement, discrimination and exclusion (Rob Moodie)

### Some of the many presentations ...

There were many new incentives, models and programs to view at the conference that it was a challenge to take it all in! Here are just a few of the



The arts play a pivotal role in creating wellbeing: The Indigenous Hip Hop Artists opening the conference on the tail of a successful national tour to outback towns & communities helping kids ‘feel good’

ones we found interesting and relevant to our community in Alice Springs.

### Supportive training packages

The Mental Illness Fellowship of Victoria is instrumental in developing training packages designed to meet the needs of people with a mental illness. These nationally recognised training packages—Certificates in *General Education for Adults* and *Introduction to Community and Event Volunteering*—aim to support people to return to study and work in a conducive environment, supporting them to gain confidence to return to mainstream education institutions.

The MI Fellowship believes that people with a mental illness should not have reduced education or long-term



unemployment outcomes due to their illness. Students study alongside other people with a mental illness, making issues around disclosure no longer problematic; classes are supportive and flexible, starting later than usual to counter the morning effects of some medications; and medical absences are understood and worked around.

As a result of their studies participating students experience:

- ◆ increased motivation
- ◆ more confidence
- ◆ a feeling of connection to the community
- ◆ further education
- ◆ employment opportunities

Confidence in employment is gained through working as a volunteer, with the transition to volunteering done in a very supported environment and experience sort through the 'Community and Event Volunteering' Course.

## Building Bridges

The Building Bridges' Project at The Royal Children's Hospital – Mental Health Services aimed for the employment of specific consumer (and now carer) consultant positions to become an integral component within their mental health services. This involves a critical shift in positioning for service users from being passive observers or receivers of a service to providing a capacity to be 'active agents' impacting on their environment.

The project took six years to create a secure position for

a permanent paid consumer consultant within the service. The responsibility of the role is to advocate on behalf of the client group; facilitate consumer feedback and recommend strategies to address issues arising; develop policies and procedures in relation to consumer participation; and develop, implement and evaluate strategies that focus on enhancing consumer participation.

The changes have resulted in a range of improved outcomes for service users as a result of workers being collectively more aware, sensitive & respectful about consumer issues. This would be an invaluable position to have on any team working with people with mental health issues.

## Reducing Stigma

Researcher, Dr Debra Rickwood (Head of the Centre for Applied Psychology at University of Canberra) undertook a project to help to reduce stigma around mental illness. She identified three main ways to reduce stigma:

- 1) protesting: suppressing negative judgmental attitudes
- 2) education: correcting misconceptions
- 3) having contact with people of the stigmatised group to hear their story: the most useful

In this project, pairs of people with mental illness visited high schools to talk about their lived experience.

This was very successful in both educating and reducing stigma among young people, where many retained increased knowledge of mental illness. Equally as importantly, the project significantly helped the people who conducted the talks.



Above: 860 people from 44 countries attended over 370 presentations!

**Visiting schools & talking about 'life with a mental illness' did more than just educate the students. It also significantly helped to raise consumers' confidence, self-esteem and sense of purpose.**

## The environment – good for mental health!

There were many inspirational talks about the positive influence of the environment on our wellbeing and mental health. We are fortunate in Alice Springs to be so close to a 'ticket' to health with our environment engulfing us every minute of every day, cradled to health with only a 5-minute trip to solitude and connection with nature.

Outdoors Inc. highlighted the therapeutic value of being in nature, as valuable as seeing a counsellor. The aims of the program are to reconnect to the physical self, reconnect socially, being connected with others—and challenged by this also—and to reconnect emotionally and spiritually. Outdoor Inc. promotes 'discovery' as a tool for connecting. The landscape story is all around and the focus goes from the internal to the external. Outdoor Inc. recently brought a group of people to the Central Australian outback as part of their journey.

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Left: One of the highlights of the conference—hearing The Choir of Hard Knocks at the Closing Ceremony



The Bipolar Bears bringing down the house!

(from previous page)

## Power On

With the Women's Coffee Morning sessions ending earlier this year, I was pleased to hear of the Power On Program run by Women's Health West (WHW). Power On works within the western region of Melbourne in partnership with women and a range of organizations to meet the social, emotional and physical health needs of women in our communities.

I found the talk about this program very inspiring—and perhaps we can adopt the model to once again give women a forum to talk about their issues. Power On consists of a 12-week program of 2-hour workshops delivered by a facilitator and peer educator to cover topics such as: Self-esteem, Assertiveness, Body image, Access to information, Communicating with your Health Professional, Menopause and your Menstrual Cycle, Nutrition and Healthy Weight, Positive thinking, Exercise and Wellbeing, and Relationships: Connecting with Others. Feedback from the women included:

- ◆ the women feel like they matter
- ◆ learning from others in the same boat is rewarding
- ◆ women have a right to ask their GP to prepare a plan to help them
- ◆ remembering that everyone has good qualities no matter how unwell they are. ✕

**An abstract book on the conference is available at MHACA. For further details or copies of session recordings on CD or MP3 visit the conference website [www.margins2mainstream.com](http://www.margins2mainstream.com)**

"Be yourself. There is no one better qualified."

# Disturbance Prayer

Lord, make me a channel of disturbance,  
Where there is apathy, let me provoke.

Where there is compliance,  
let me bring questioning.

Where there is silence, may I be a voice.

Where there is too much comfort  
and too little action, grant disruption.

Where there are doors closed  
and hearts locked,  
grant the willingness to listen.

When laws dictate and pain is overlooked ...

When tradition speaks louder than need ...

When we refuse to take control  
of our own lives ... our own people ...

our own alienated ...

Disturb us O Lord,  
teach us to be radical.

Grant that I may seek to do justice  
rather than to talk about it;

To be with, as well as for, the alienated;  
To love the unlovable as well as the lovely;

To dare to touch the pain  
of those we meet;

To accept responsibility  
to be truly human.

Lord, make me a channel of disturbance.

*Derived and adapted from an anonymous author  
by Janet Meagher, Director of Development,  
Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association, NSW  
[a poem read out as part of a presentation  
at the Margins to Mainstream Conference  
in Melbourne on 10-12 September 2008]*

