

MEN

THE NSW MEN'S
HEALTH PLAN 2009–2012
STATES THAT:

“Not only do men
(and women)
experience life
differently, but they
think, perceive,
react, respond,
and communicate
differently about
their life, and their
health.”¹



OVERVIEW

The roles and expectations of men have been changing over the last 50 years. They are certainly more aware of their role in the family unit and are becoming more aware of their own health and wellbeing. However, men generally are less confident expressing their emotions and still less likely than women to discuss and care for their physical and mental health.

Over time there has been a growing recognition that men as a group have their own way of dealing with life's challenges and as such require a different approach to addressing the social issues that men as a group face.

The wellbeing of men is impacted by all aspects of life, including their family, social, work, income and living circumstances.²

IN THE BEGA VALLEY

Men are 49.1% of the population in the Bega Valley, this means that there are approximately 15,684 men in the local government area. 21% of the male population in the Shire are men aged 65 years and over. Men also make up 50.9% of the Bega Valley workforce.

In the Bega Valley family breakdown has been identified as a key issue for men. 14.9% of families in the Shire are single parent families and men account for only 21% of these single parent households.³

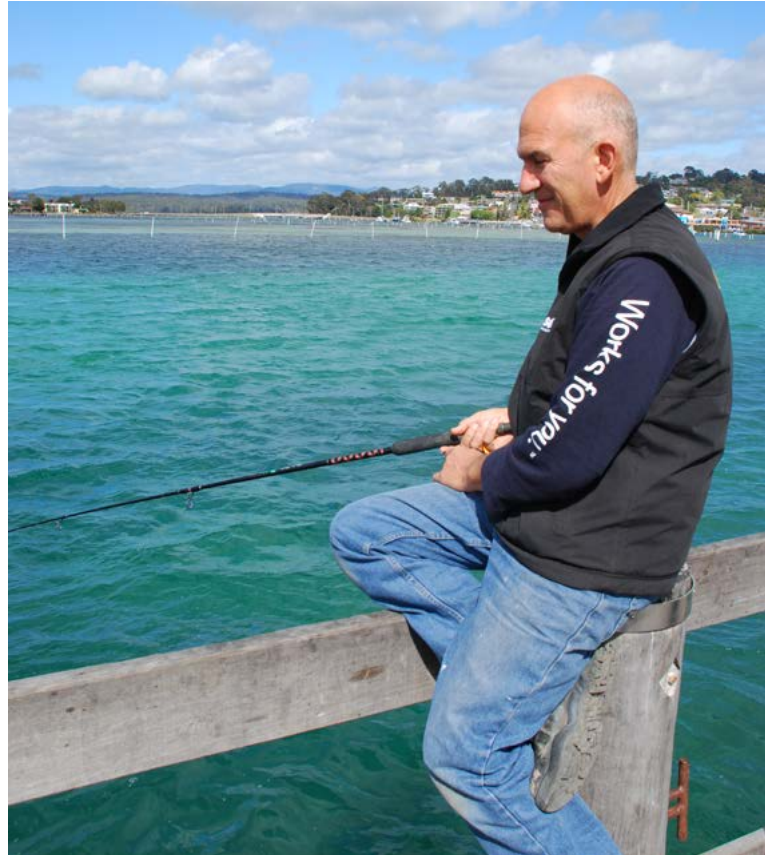
THE CHANGES

In 2010 the Federal Government released the first Australian National Male Health Policy.⁴ The policy recognises that men have unique health needs and should be given health information in a way that they can relate to. One of the priority areas of the policy is to ensure that health care and wellbeing services are tailored to the needs of men.

There are growing expectations that men will play a larger role in the family unit and while this has been welcomed by many men it brings its own set of pressures. Pro-active services may be able to support men in their role within the family.

The Australian Men's Shed Association has been a significant initiative for men across Australia. The Men's Shed movement offers an environment that promotes social inclusion by providing a place where men can work on meaningful projects.

There are now 650 sheds around Australia with an involvement of around 125,000 people and employing seven full time staff.⁵ Men's Sheds in the Bega Valley have gathered momentum across the Shire over the past five years, with new Sheds in Bega, Bermagui, Eden and Merimbula. Men's Sheds have proven to be a great resource, particularly for older men. Their capacity to address issues of isolation and



provide education on a range of issues is of great benefit to men across the Shire. It is understood that some Men's Sheds have also been involved in mentoring young people.

THE SOCIAL ISSUES

Mental Health

Mental health is a significant issue for men in the Shire. A recent NSW Health Survey has indicated that 11% of men in the Southern NSW Local Health District were experiencing high or very high psychological distress.⁶

Suicide remains a major issue for young men in our community. Nationally, male suicides continue to outnumber female suicides. In 2010 male suicide accounted for over three-quarters of all suicide deaths in Australia.⁷

In many cases unemployment and family breakdown results in stress and depression. While mental health and counselling services do exist, they are often not tailored to the needs of men and men tend not to readily access them.

Family Breakdown

It is understood that cultural stereotypes about the roles of parents can make it even harder for men to access flexible work conditions. Many men feel pressure that they are expected to be the primary breadwinner, and like women, find balancing work and family responsibilities difficult. Men also believe that long work hours prevent them from spending time with their families.⁸

A lack of appropriate support services has meant that many men have been left to cope alone with the impacts of separation and divorce. Specialist counselling services for men experiencing family breakdown has been identified as a need in the Shire.

It was felt that specialist intervention was needed for men experiencing family breakdown, possibly including issues around domestic violence. This counselling was seen as being especially critical in the first 48 hours of family breakdown. Furthermore there is a lack of crisis accommodation for men in the Shire, the closest being Canberra or Nowra. This can lead to homelessness, which some men experience after leaving the family home, and further exacerbate feelings of isolation.

Domestic Violence

The research indicates that men are overwhelmingly identified as the perpetrators of domestic violence. The incidence of domestic and sexual violence is unlikely to be eradicated without well-resource programs that attempt to change the behaviour of men who commit these crimes.

Services for men must be part of a holistic approach to ending violence against women. Working with perpetrators to end their violent behaviour as well as ensuring the safety and support of victims is required.

However, there are currently no programs aimed at behaviour modification available in the Shire. This limits the sentencing and treatment options for those who

commit or threaten acts of violence.

As Aboriginal women and children are over-represented as victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, responses developed must include specific strategies which ensure cultural relevance and inclusiveness for Aboriginal men.

The perpetrators of domestic violence and sexual assault are often men. However, the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research has identified that 18% of perpetrators are women and 28.9% of victims are men.⁹ Appropriate resources are needed to address domestic violence where the victims are men.

HEALTH

THE NSW GOVERNMENT, THROUGH THE NSW MEN'S HEALTH PLAN:

“recognises that in order to improve the health of the community generally, it is important to improve the health of men (and boys)..... Health services need to find more positive and effective ways to reach and engage with men, especially those with the poorest health, so that all men and boys have the best opportunity to reach and maintain optimal health.”¹⁰

Factors such as isolation, age, work and socio-economic status, along with other facets of an individual's social identity, have a powerful influence on men's capacity to achieve and maintain good health.

Men, as a group, experience poorer health and have shorter average life expectancies than do women. Men have higher rates of mortality and morbidity in mental health, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, injuries and cancer. Men access health services at a lower rate than women, and have fewer visits to hospital. However, their stays in hospital are longer and interventions are more intensive and costly.¹¹

All community and health services need to consider the particular needs of specific groups of men and boys in planning the delivery of community and health services. Targeted

interventions for those groups of males most at risk of poor health may be required.¹²

Target groups would include:

- Aboriginal males
- older men (particularly those with cancer, cardio-vascular disease or chronic diseases)
- men from low socio-economic backgrounds
- men experiencing family breakdown and social isolation
- young men
- refugees and males from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds

It is understood that men living outside of major cities are more likely to smoke and engage in high-risk alcohol use. Head and neck cancers and lip cancers are two groups of cancers that have a higher incidence outside of major cities. These cancers are associated with increased smoking and alcohol consumption.¹³

A concerning statistic from the NSW Population Health Survey is that 15.4% of men in the Southern NSW LHD (compared to 8.3% of men in NSW) have been told by a doctor or hospital that they have diabetes or high blood glucose levels.¹⁴

Isolation

Social, geographic and financial isolation have been raised as significant issues for men in the Bega Valley. Isolation is a considerable factor in discussions about depression, suicide, health, and family issues. Social isolation often leads people to seek company and as there are little alternatives for men in the Shire they often end up at the hotels and clubs. This can lead to other problems such as alcohol and gambling abuse.

There is a need to engage young men within the Shire in appropriate community groups. Anecdotal evidence suggests that younger men may be at risk of becoming isolated, in part due to a lack of employment opportunities for some young men in the Shire.



ACCORDING TO THE AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF HEALTH AND WELFARE (AIHW):

“There is increasing awareness that males and females have distinct health needs and concerns related to their gender and biological sex. This is illustrated by different rates of injury, illness and mortality; different attitudes towards health and other risks; and the way each group uses, or does not use, health services. In many (but not all) areas of health, Australia’s males have poorer outcomes than their female counterparts.”¹⁵



A specific problem that has been identified in the Shire is in relation to the particular problems facing older farming men and male retirees. Support for older men has been identified as a need in the Shire, in particular assistance with housekeeping after a fall or illness or after the death of spouse.

Sexuality

There are a number of gay men that reside in the Bega Valley community. At a local level the lack of access to specific services, homophobia and the extraordinary pressures on young men coming out in a rural area are the significant issues.

Whilst sexuality is a defining factor for many gay men they also face similar issues as other men, parents, people with disabilities and young people.

STRENGTHS IN THE BEGA VALLEY

The growth of the Men's Shed movement in the Bega Valley has been a positive development in the Shire. Men's Sheds offer a supportive environment for men to undertake a range of activities and at the same time they hope to improve the wellbeing and health of their members.¹⁶

It is beneficial to expand the capacity and number of Men's Sheds across the Shire. Continuing to support the Men's Shed

program and promoting participation in the program may be beneficial in addressing a range of social issues. Organisations may be able to work in collaboration with Men's Sheds to address issues around isolation and family breakdown, as well as providing health promotion and education programs.

“Men don't talk face to face they talk shoulder to shoulder.”¹⁷

THE CONSTRAINTS

Whilst the Men's Shed movement is an effective social opportunity for older men, it is not the preferred option for younger men in the Shire. There is a significant gap for men in the 30 to 50 year age group and they are at particular risk of social isolation. At present Men's Sheds are about the only support service for men in the Shire.

Mental health, family breakdown and domestic violence have all been identified as social issues for men in the Shire. However, targeted services for men are limited and a need has been identified for additional mental health services in the area. In particular, more experienced and qualified mental health professionals, including psychologists and social workers are needed.

Men in regional and remote areas of Australia may have health benefits because



they do not live in the major cities. However, they may also face other health issues because of their location, work, lifestyle and lack of access to support services.

Many occupations in rural and remote Australia involve using heavy machinery and working with chemicals. There are often long shifts, lone workers and more risks involved with their commute to work because of longer distances to travel and higher speed limits.¹⁸

THE OPPORTUNITIES

The development of a resource centre for men in the Bega Valley is seen as an opportunity. Such a resource centre could provide support, information and referral services. Support services for men and their families is an area that requires further development and is presently an area of unmet need. A resource centre for men has been discussed during consultations as a positive way of supporting men and their families.

Consideration could also be given to finding avenues for promoting and encouraging positive images of men. Men have an influential and valuable role in our community as fathers, partners, sons, community members and mates.

There is an opportunity to establish a forum for the various organisations and community groups that are involved in men's issues. Developing and participating in networks that address issues for men is important and has been raised as a need during consultations. The role of the forum would be to provide an avenue for organisations to get together, discuss and collectively take action to address issues affecting men.

Organisations involved in providing health and community services for men in the Shire could benefit from continuing to develop partnerships with State and Federal Governments where possible. This is seen as an opportunity to build the capacity of the health and community sector in the Shire to respond in a meaningful way to the needs of men.

There is an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the Southern NSW Local Health District around men's health issues. Health services that are flexible and targeted specifically at men, including after hours services for men in full time employment are required. There is an opportunity to establish a men's health service that operates out of normal working hours, to specifically address the health needs of men. Providing health services in settings such as workplaces, social and sporting clubs and recreational venues may be an effective way of engaging men.¹⁹

The continued support of the Cancer Support Network to promote better cancer awareness, early detection and intervention for men is seen as an important opportunity.

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SOCIAL ISSUES PAPERS

This document is part of a broader Social Issues Paper produced by the Bega Valley Shire Council. To read the document in its' entirety go to www.begavalley.nsw.gov.au

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