

## News from Mental Health Special Interest Group

It's easy to despair about mental health in Australia, given the approximately seven per cent funding for a 30 per cent plus burden of disease, a health minister characterising pregnancy counselling as a mental health issue, and a prime minister simplistically representing the 'mental health crisis' as a problem of de-institutionalisation and drug addiction. However, the PHAA, and Mental Health Special Interest Group members in particular, are well-positioned by their professional backgrounds, by the framework provided by the public health model, and by their work at the 'coalface', to know what can be done to remedy the 'crisis'. For us, desperation is mainly about shortage of time in busy lives for the conception and support of the most effective and economical ways forward which make use of our individual expertise. In this month's issue of InTouch, SIG members have provided a sample of their thoughts and activities, optimistic and ambitious about understanding and advancing mental health and well-being.

Immediate past convenor, Valerie Gerrand, attended the Mental Health Services (TheMHS) Summer Forum in Sydney in February. TheMHS is an Australian and New Zealand collaborative venture which runs a two-day Summer Forum each year and an annual Conference which attracts over 1000 mental health clinicians, service managers, consumers, carers, researchers, educators and policy makers (see [www.themhs.org](http://www.themhs.org)). She reports excellent and substantive contributions at the Summer Forum around the sensitive theme of violence and mental illness. The focus from leading local and international figures such as Professor Paul Mullen, Monash Professor of Forensic Psychiatry, and Professor Kevin Gournay from the Maudsley Institute in London, was on both current data and also practical, evidence-based interventions to reduce the risk of aggression from and towards people experiencing mental illness. It was especially encouraging to hear of Senator Lyn Allison's involvement in the first day of the Forum. This included a presentation on her recent visit to mental health services in Trieste in Italy, together with Vivienne Miller, a key member of the TheMHS executive who is very familiar with Italy's mental health reforms. According to Senator Allison, the Trieste services demonstrate a strong focus on community-based care, with only a few inpatient beds as back-up.

Your current convenor responded to the 17th Council of Australian Governments (COAG) meeting in February, where mental health was a major item, with a letter to the editor to the major newspapers, commending the substance and direction but giving notice of PHAA's watching to see the 'delivery of the goods', in particular vastly increased funding. Around this time, we were also watchful, supporting the efforts of the Women's Health SIG and PHAA executive on the controversial legislation before federal parliament, to give health ministers control of access to abortion drug RU486. PHAA member, Melbourne philosopher Leslie Cannold had an excellent opinion article published in the Melbourne 'Age' newspaper, (edited version) reproduced in this InTouch.

New SIG member, Mary Gays of the Mental Health Foundation (ACT) and the Mental Illness Fellowship (ACT) recently organised a fund-raising trivia quiz night attended by over 320 people and raising nearly \$6,000, money to be match-funded by the ACT Government, to be used for a patient comfort fund at local hospital services. Three more of these events are planned for 2006 and Canberra PHAA members who might enjoy some fun in a good cause should consult <http://www.mentalhealthevents.com>.

From Victoria, Jacqui Schultz, coordinator of the Community Visitors' Program, Office of the Public Advocate, provides papers from her research on the overly high representation of the indigenous community in the criminal justice system, and the double jeopardy of cultural and disability disadvantage. Of particular interest is her documenting of the low take-up of the Independent Third Person Program, designed to assist all Victorians with a disability, interviewed or making a formal statement to police. Very important work, and we encourage Jacqui to submit a paper to the Journal.

On Mental Health Promotion, member Gillian Church, CEO of the Mental Health Association NSW Inc (MHA) tells of her organisation's commissioning of a study to look at available evidence for effective mental health promotion campaigns, national and international. Findings reported in a 2004 Mental Health Promotion Feasibility Study supported combining 'social marketing' and community development in mass media campaigns. The MHA is watching COAG developments, concerned that mental health promotion is not fully understood, is often confused with prevention, where there is overlap, and inappropriately used synonymously with mental illness awareness.

Peter Trebilco raises several important issues in drawing our attention to a recent initiative of the RANZCP, which is seeking from the Australian Medical Council an additional classification: Addiction Specialist. He alludes to stigma in the term 'dual diagnosis' and importantly to a history of confusion in the treatment of those suffering mental illness and addiction. Implications for services and staffing, especially staff training are discussed.

Finally, PHAA executive director Pieta Laut supports the SIG with her eagle eye, posting important documents on the website. The latest edition has been to draw our attention to the work of the European Commission in addressing mental health problems, noting this greatest burden of disease after cardiovascular disease in Europe hampers all aspects of the EU's social, economic, educational, justice and health care systems, costing three to four per cent of the GNP of the EU. The Commission has produced a green paper, open to consultation until 31 May, 2006.

Thank you to members for on-going activity and support of mental health and the work of the SIG. I encourage all members to continue our task of participation and advocacy, taking advantage especially of opportunities to publish, to submit thoughts or reports for this newsletter, the Journal or posting on the website.

***Sue Humphries***

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