Mensheds Australia

Recommendations to the Senate Select Committee on Men's Health

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Contact: Peter Sergeant, CEO

Pre-amble

1. What is a men's shed?

The 'Shed' holds an important place in Australian male culture. Traditionally it is a 'man's space' where men have retreated from the hectic pace of work, life and family to make or repair things and to enjoy the company of other men. Due to changing property and social trends in recent decades the backyard shed is on the demise. These circumstances combined with retirement, loss of a partner for many result in loss of social networks, self-esteem, sense of purpose and identity and cause adverse social, emotional, health and well-being issues for many men. For Indigenous men, systematic disempowerment, loss of authority, hierarchies, traditional men's spaces, as well as loss of identity, connection with the land, respect, culture and spirituality, have also had profound negative impacts.

Although sheds are diverse in organisation, structure and function, they are common in purpose, they are a space for men, men of all ages and circumstances. Men's sheds address the need for socialisation, friendship, camaraderie, self-esteem and for purposeful activity for a large cross-section of men: young men, Indigenous men, unemployed men, older men, retired men, men with mental health problems and disengaged men. It is an essential precursor to the establishment of emotional, social and general health as an integral part of primary health care initiatives, along with communication to connect services and provide peer support and encouragement.

At present, Australian men's sheds are a grassroots movement that is largely under-acknowledged, under-resourced and mostly unintegrated with the health system. They have emerged across the country in the absence of any policy framework, or support or co-ordination at State or Federal level. This is largely unprecedented and unique among primary health care strategies in this country.

Men's sheds come in all shapes and sizes, with different governance, management, operational and finance structures, with different aims and objectives and numbers of participants. It is estimated that there are approximately 300 sheds operating or being planned in Australia at the present time.

2. Mensheds Australia is a not-for-profit company and a registered health charity already providing an extensive support infrastructure for the men' sheds across Australia.

3. Mensheds Australia has a simple message – men's sheds are about the health and well-being of men. This is achieved by:

a. Creating physical, mental, social and spiritual activities for men.

b. Involvement of men with their community.

c. Improvement in economic activity for men and their community.

d. Maintaining the sustainability of the men's sheds as a men's place.

Mensheds Australia Ltd. - A.B.N. 29 122 352 372
Address: PO Box 6599 Parramatta DC NSW 2150 Australia
Telephone: 02 9890 8351, Email: info@mensheds.com.au – Web: www.mensheds.com.au

4. **Justification of men's sheds – Australia has a very good health system for treating illness, but is very poor at addressing preventative risk factors. This is where a well run, well funded men's shed comes into its own as it can address many of the following risk factors depending on the local needs:**
    a. Getting men active and involved.
    b. Allowing men to do things that they want and need.
    c. Smoking, alcohol, and substance abuse through diversionary activities.
    d. Diet and weight control.
    e. Relieving boredom, giving men hope and support.
    f. Men's awareness of health issues, diabetes, prostate etc.
    g. Gender imbalance.
    h. Language and cultural issues and promote conversations.
    i. Training and health projects.
    j. Support for young men.
    k. Youth, child and family support.
    l. Ease of access for men.
    m. Mental and emotional support.
    n. Achieved with 'men friendly' services and developed with 'action research'.

5. **What men's sheds need** is action and funding, not more policies and research; no more 'talk fests as the evidence already exists.

Recommendations

1. Men's Sheds should be recognised at local, State and National level as being integral to primary health care service delivery for men.
2. Particular emphasises should be placed on the potential benefits for men of correctly established and supported men's sheds for regional, rural, remote and Indigenous communities (many existing men's sheds are too small and too exclusive).
3. The paradigm changes taking place should be studied by policy makers together with the evidence of support from communities for the establishment of men's sheds. Ongoing problems exist because practical hands-on solutions bet bogged down with academics and bureaucracies who do not understand.
4. Responsible politicians and government departments at all levels, in each State need to be informed about the benefits of men's sheds to the social and emotional well-being of men, encouraging them to include strategies for the

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establishment and ongoing support of men's sheds in relevant health policies, plans, processes and funding.

5. Mensheds Australia should work with government and non-government organisations in the development and dissemination of guidelines that support:
    a. The establishment and operation of sustainable men's sheds;
    b. The conduct of health promotion activities in men's sheds;
    c. The documentation and evaluation of men's shed activities including health activities.
6. Funding of opportunities for public discussion of these and related guidelines should be provided by State and Federal Governments e.g. support for the *National Men's Shed Forum* in Bathurst NSW in June 2009.
7. Coordinated health program delivery and financial support from local health services needs to be addressed in order that programs become more relevant and men friendly and meet the needs and wants of the men.
8. A consistent approach from Local, State or Commonwealth Governments together with Corporations and Non-government Organisations for funding the establishment, growth, consolidation and sustainability of men's sheds is warranted. There needs to be sufficient funding, not just to get programs going but to keep them going. Too many programs are under funded and short sighted with demands for short term outcomes.
9. The men's shed initiative requires a 'whole of government' approach not individual agencies operating in silos fulfilling their own, often poorly conceived programs. Programs need to be developed in conjunction with men's sheds not from the top down.
10. Government and non-government agencies to consider support for the already extensive support infrastructure provided by Mensheds Australia to support the exponential growth in demand for support services, including:
    a. Ensuring that men in sheds are involved in decision making about the issues that affect them;
    b. Seeking new and maintaining old community spaces for men;
    c. Facilitating programs that are embed in men's sheds within agencies and broader community activities, including such things as youth, old men, unemployment, disability, respite and diversionary programs;
    d. Allocating funds for men's management and health workers who are responsible for supporting men's sheds and health programs within sheds;
    e. Making provision in discretionary and recurrent budget lines, for education and training programs;
    f. Allocating resources for pilot projects that progress to ongoing health attributes of men's sheds, including funds to document, implement, administer and evaluate ongoing men's shed programs.

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