



Secret men's business, grumpy old men ...

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In this paper, the focus is on issues facing men, particularly men in regional areas where the incidence of isolation, loneliness and depression are especially acute. Some relevant literature is reviewed. The potential role of “men’s sheds” in helping to overcome these problems is discussed, along with some brief comments on the overall contribution to the community that can be made by men’s sheds.

The focus then turns to the Mensheds Australia network as a basis for the effective operation of individual men’s sheds and as the basis for an emerging quality assurance program to assure public and private supporters that the use of resources and programs are effective in advancing men’s health and well-being.

Secret men's business and grumpy old men

Secret men’s business, grumpy old men and other such sayings are used to typify the plight of men, particularly in rural and remote areas and serve to signal an underlying problem in dealing with men’s health. It is secret because most people do not understand what men are facing in rural and remote areas, and they are grumpy because no one seems to care and there seems to be no answers.

Some people think it’s secret because we use the words Men’s Shed. Why not a Women’s Shed? Well we use the term men’s shed to focus on the problems facing men – problems that have been slipping through the cracks. Women are better at sharing their problems as they have had their ‘men’s sheds’ for years and they are far better served than the men in our community.

Rationale for a men's shed

In recent years there has been an increased interest in the link between social activity and physical health.¹

Whilst membership of a social group produces certain obligations upon an individual it also can reap many rewards.² People can participate in all types of social activities in many different sorts of formal and informal social networks. It is argued that such social participation is important for personal empowerment as it allows an individual to gain an understanding and control over personal, social, economic and political forces. This empowers the person to take action to improve their life situations.³

As a result of this link between social participation and health a significant number of reports on health promotion in recent decades have stressed the importance of community participation for successful health promotion programs.⁴

However, whilst all individuals have limitations in their ability to be expressive and open in their relations with others, men generally find this more problematic. In order to deal with these challenges facing men there has been a rise in the formation of all male support systems. For example, there has been a steady increase in the numbers of self help groups developed specifically for men’s health issues such as fathering, prostate cancer, masculinity and men’s self development.⁵

Adult learning in some form is critical for adults of all ages. As remoteness increases and town size decreases, involvement in networks and community activities becomes a critical part of adult learning

¹ Lindstrom, The Three in One Men’s Project, Wollongong, 2001.

² Hawe, Department: Dept of Community Health Sciences 2000.

³ Lindstrom, , The Three in One Men’s Project, Wollongong, 2005.

⁴ Lindstrom, The three in one men’s project, Wollongong University 2005.

⁵ Reddin, The three in one men’s project, Wollongong University 2005.

as well as for social, family and economic well-being. Most men want learning provided in informal, practical group settings, locally and on site through organisations they know and feel comfortable within. Men generally learn best by doing and through practice in familiar situations, through organisations and people they know and trust rather than via abstracted learning 'about' something in simulated situations. Men, particularly older men with typically negative previous experiences of school and formal learning, generally prefer to learn through being involved in an activity in real and familiar situations.¹

Recommendations were also made by Barry Golding, that seek to address identified issues of gender equity – particularly the need for local incentives to encourage learning by men as well as women in small rural towns, based on men's identified learning preferences.

The main aim of these all male support groups is to allow men to assess themselves by looking inward through emotional problems and learning new skills with a strong emphasis on emotional support. In doing this, men are enabled to bond and form social support networks with other members.² Men's sheds fits into this criterion.

The idea of the 'shed' as a place where isolated men get away from the 'missus' has been turned on its head. A shed is where isolated men go to get together with others, mostly other men. This is very much in keeping with the work and war history of many men. This communal connection is also a deeply cherished aspect of the traditional life of Indigenous men. The evidence is mostly anecdotal at present, but sheds are important for the flourishing of men, older men in particular.³

Health agencies should be enthusiastic about working with men on their terms and "turf". They should respect the importance of making room for experiences and create common ground. Finally they should offer the expertise they have, when and as, the men request it.⁴

It is important to recognise the significance of diversity when considering the guidelines. Men are not all the same, or in other words 'one size does not fit all'.⁵

Leadership is important in all of this and it resides in and between all of us.⁶

Members of men's sheds can work together to help save lives and to minimise the problems brought about through isolation and loneliness, found not only in regional areas, but also in our big cities, particularly when men have to go through a transition; men do not build networks outside of work, as well as women do.

We believe that well structured and well run men's sheds help men to cope more easily, overcome their problems and ultimately do well for themselves and for others in their community.

There are clear benefits of having a Men's Shed in a community:

- improved health and well-being of the men who live in the community
- improved family relationships
- improved involvement and integration of men into the community
- improved involvement, health and lifestyle of Indigenous men
- improved lifestyles for differently abled men and men generally

¹ Final Report to Adult, Community and Further Education Board, Victoria, Barry Golding 2004.

² Reddin, The Three in One Men's Project, Wronging University 2005.

³ Rick Hayes Latrobe University, Men's shed Conference Lakes Entrance 2005.

⁴ Donovan Report, Men's counselling Research 1998.

⁵ Emslie, Hunt & O'Brien 2004.

⁶ Rick Hayes Latrobe University 2005.



- improved career prospects for schoolboys, not doing well at school and youth
- decreased unemployment and the associated health ramifications
- increased involvement of families in community activities
- improved interaction of farmers with their local communities
- improved services to those men that the health system finds are hard to reach.

Women and men's sheds

When it comes to men's health and well-being it is the women and the families that take the brunt of the problems. They too suffer the stress and the pressure associated with men's issues when their men folk fall apart. Why should they have to worry when their man takes the gun with them when they go out into the paddocks?

A men's shed requires a holistic approach and men's sheds would not function without the support of the women in the community.

Women need somewhere for their men to go, especially when they have no hobbies and their self esteem is low as they go through the various life transitions. Women need their space as well; they need to get the men out from under their feet.

Most women say the same things:

- their men tend to treat them like mothers, asking what to do next
- many men feel hopeless, helpless and lost and is a reason why some marriages breakdown
- women can find someone to talk to, some men can't; they need a men's shed
- men won't talk about financial issues, they leave it to the women, who collect the mail, do the banking and in many cases do the bookkeeping, while men tend to ignore and just worry
- women are hiding the bills from their men – then crisis. "It will upset him and I can't stand the agro, I leave it for a few days and it may work itself out"
- women often say "I would rather have a husband than an award winning executive"
- "I wish he would talk to me, I don't give a damn how bad things are; we can work it out"
- men reach a stage where they don't know how to socialise.

Men's issues come about because men have no one to talk to. A men's shed, providing the opportunity to talk, can maintain a degree of happiness which leads to contentment for both men, women and the rest of the family. Australian men are proud and tend to keep their business to themselves and will not share their problems, without a catalyst.

The project

Many communities have recognised that men's sheds have a role in providing health and well-being services to men in a variety of situations. As at January 2006, there are some 200 men's sheds in various stages of development across Australia and with variable levels of performance.

Some programs structured specifically to meet the needs of men are being embraced around the country. Some of these programs are not self-sustaining and may require innovation in the way they are delivered to reach effectively the men that are targeted by the program.

Men's sheds are starting to play a role in supporting men in their community, and there is a need to develop a network for effective sharing of information and knowledge about how to operate men's sheds to be effective as organisations and in delivering services on men's health and well-being.

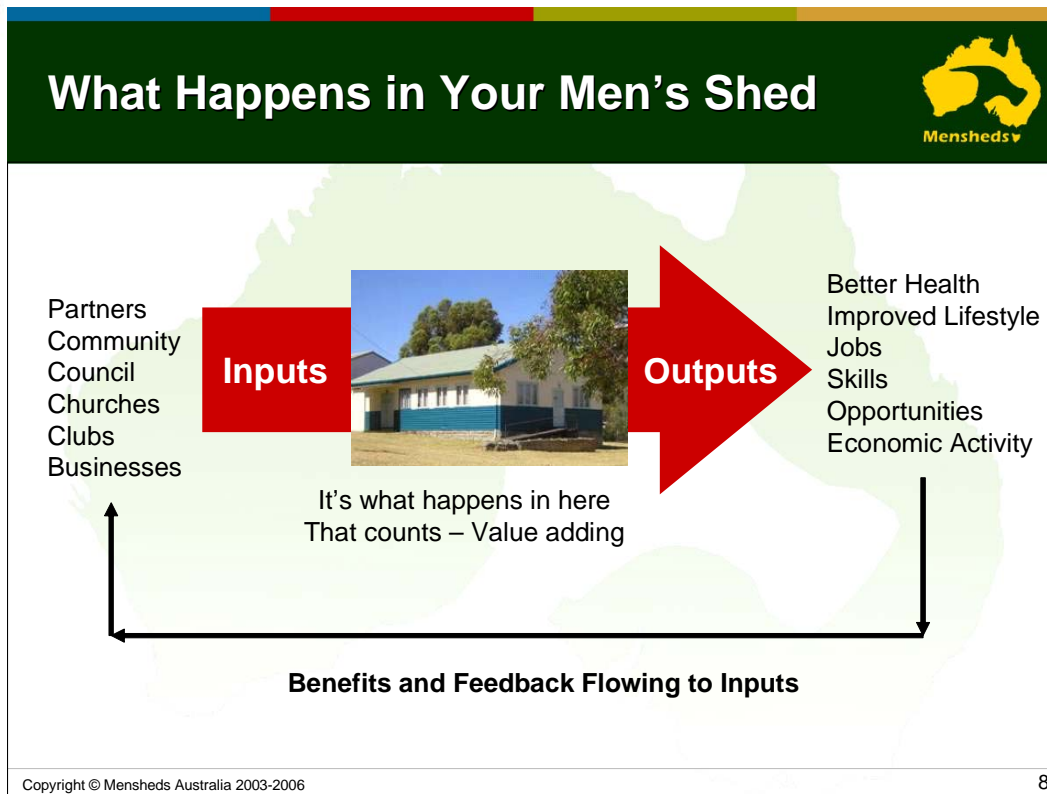
With the community becoming more aware of the need to address men's health issues in an environment of rapid changes in technology and resource scarcity, there was the opportunity to do things differently. A business model and infrastructure was developed that was multi-faceted, multimedia and could deliver support, even to the remotest of communities where face to face delivery, if any, is all they know. The most important feature had to be flexible access to men's sheds and allowing them to utilise their own existing hardware from wherever they are.

Other attributes included:

- building a culture of analysis and action rather than opinion and talk fests and at the same time generate new paradigms to accommodate the needs of the impending retirement of many Baby Boomers and the rise of the Gen X's and Gen Y's
- materials in simple language, yet comprehensive enough to meet the requirements of men's shed operators with variable backgrounds and experience
- the infrastructure had to support managing the mass of information, knowledge, tools, processes, templates and training materials and make it easily accessible to the user without them being overwhelmed
- systems to allow the leverage of existing materials and skills developed over many years and allow for new authors to participate remotely
- collaborate with a wide range of health and community organisations to ascertain their requirements and deliver measurable outcomes
- enable men to undertake self-paced training, with face-to-face contact predominantly solving problems and helping them to move forward, (rather than being locked up in a training room)
- develop structures and programs that can extend beyond men's health issues and address the wider issues of community and business development.

Whilst a men's shed will work well in almost all communities (even with only a few hundred people), this was not going to happen quickly or effectively without some support structures to provide basic advice and share learning experiences. The strength of the community and its programs reflects its ability to build its capacity and its willingness to develop and implement new initiatives.

The task is to make the role illustrated in the diagram below operate effectively and deliver community outcomes.



Enter Mensheds Australia

Mensheds Australia saw the need for an organisation that was able to provide support to local men's sheds by:

- providing quick and easy access to products, services and practical knowledge on an as needed and immediate basis
- retaining the support of the health industry and communities
- manage vast amounts of information along with appropriate tools, processes, templates and training materials
- accommodate a wide variety of men's sheds, in size, types of men, activities, management capacity and cultural differences
- programs needed to be deployed throughout the many remote locations in Australia
- the services had to be available at moderate costs. This could be achieved by moving away from traditional contact methods to electronic methods, and by developing scale economies.

In addition Mensheds Australia sought to:

- **Develop sustainability:** This includes elements that ensure the currency of the developed health and well-being programs, proper governance and administration, and the capacity to be financially independent.
- **Proper management:** This involves the development of suitable business structures, business planning and the formation of partnerships with business and agencies in the community
- **Building capacity:** The immediate task is to build the capacity of the local community to setup, manage and operate a successful men's shed. The development of these capacities is also relevant to the overall operation of local communities.

- Developing the potential to do related things for the community: Men's sheds are places of activity. Men's sheds can provide services to their communities including fixing things for the elderly, engaging the differently abled and unemployed, and re-engaging men with their community activities and projects.

Another challenge was to propagate the Mensheds Australia concept without it being misunderstood and watered down. We had to be able to integrate with the health and other community services provided by the governments and the private sector and overcome any anti-business and anti-entrepreneurial sentiment, so necessary to make it happen.

The ultimate challenge was to give the project our undivided attention and sustain ourselves until people believed that men's sheds hold an important key to improving men's health and that Mensheds Australia had developed what was needed to provide support for them.

What is happening now?

Mensheds Australia provides services and support to men's sheds in all States of Australia,

- guidance – for the “get going” or starting a men's shed
- support – for the “keep going” of the men's shed
- partnerships – building support infrastructure for tapping local capacity
- leadership – developing the required vision, drive and entrepreneurship
- research and development – providing the right knowledge at the right time
- communication – improving rural and remote areas networks
- growth in community involvement – building the sustainability

Mensheds Australia provides a comprehensive infrastructure for men's shed members, including:

- enabling people to quickly source relevant knowledge to meet immediate needs with appropriate resources
- providing a 24 x 7 Help Desk service providing support, experience and practical knowledge
- a creative culture that delivers on opportunity generation and innovation
- delivering learning modules developed specifically for men's sheds, including all aspects of starting and running a men's shed and men's health and well-being
- providing modern training products with voice-over delivery through the Internet and web conferencing, in addition to seminars and other men's sheds functions
- reducing the cost of starting and running a men's shed, while giving the men's shed freedom to act in the best interests of the community
- providing the most comprehensive and 'men's shed-friendly' information and knowledge resource available for men's sheds anywhere in the world.

Our mission is to provide a Peak Body with an infrastructure for delivery of health-related information and to make that all important connection between men and the available Health Services, which start with their involvement in the local men's shed. In addressing the health issues it is important to keep the men involved in both physical and mental activities and doing useful things for their families and communities.



The journey has begun. The returns are beginning to flow along with the recognition that this is an initiative helping to fill an enormous need, particularly for rural and remote Australia.

Engaging the private sector

The case for engaging the private sector is a compelling one, with many companies now recognising the value of the 'Triple Bottom Line', (Financial, Social and Environmental).

Mensheds Australia seeks to apply private sector resources that can help us improve our response to men's health and well-being. Many corporations and businesses have philanthropic arms. Mensheds Australia has a very important role in facilitating their involvement – something the individual men sheds have difficulty with.

The private sector has resources, expertise and the ability to respond quickly. Over the years the private sector has proven to be invaluable in responding to many situations, when called upon to do so. However, the private sector needs to be professionally and creatively engaged.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is not a fad; it is an imperative with an ever growing list of Australian and International companies benefiting from its initiatives. It's accepted wisdom for the mainstream and is increasingly recognised as a driver of innovation, a new way to enter fresh markets and a means for companies to differentiate themselves.

We must all make a concerted effort to reach out to private sector partners and supporters, helping them to provide the tools and the processes to better leverage their contributions.

A goal of Mensheds Australia is to help build sustainable partnerships for men's sheds. The task is to ensure that member men's sheds will respond to the needs of their communities and will conduct themselves professionally and responsibly. That will provide the private sector with the confidence to become involved and also gain the support of the public sector agencies.

Conclusion

A Men's Shed is Not "Play School". Men's Sheds Provide the missing answers as a catalyst for improving both men's health and well-being and their community.

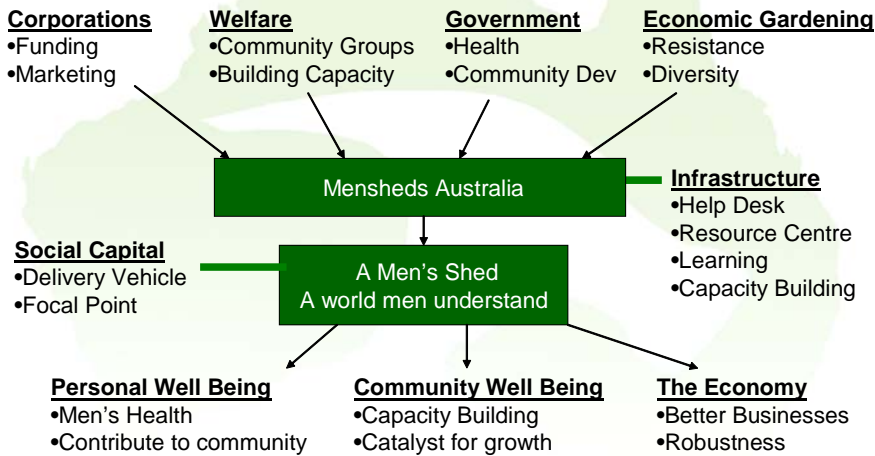
Mensheds Australia (a not-for-profit) was formed some four years ago to support the development of individual men's sheds throughout Australia building them into valuable and sustainable community assets. Together we:

- promote the health and well-being of men
- provide a place for men to participate in activities, both physical and mental
- be sustainable in management and financial terms.

But it's not just about grumpy old men, it is about **social capital and social infrastructure**. It is the attitude, spirit, shared norms, values, understandings and willingness of people to engage in community activities. A men's shed can facilitate co-operation within, or among community groups. Over time, social capital builds social infrastructure, and provides more development opportunities for the community.

The following diagram provides a perspective on the future. The men's shed, with its embodied technology and support structure, is seen as a key element of the social capital. There is the potential to harness a range of community development resources in a non-political way, and to deliver a range of personal, community and economic outcomes. The local men's shed, properly supported, can be a vehicle of hope for many communities.

Building Sustainable Men's Sheds



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For more information: visit www.mensheds.com.au.

Presenter

Peter Sergeant is the Managing Director of Mensheds Australia. Peter started his first business in 1967, an agricultural machinery sales and service business in central western NSW. He was twenty-four and just married. As he says it was fun struggling to survive in those early years. After fourteen years, the drought of the early 1980s forced him to close the business, which had become one of the biggest in Australia.

Not daunted by this, Peter has spent the time since then working with businesses and communities, developing and testing ideas and working with emerging technologies. Along the way Peter has researched and tested many methodologies relating to businesses and communities, their related structures, technology and their role in developing regional communities, all of which is now being applied to Mensheds Australia.

Peter is also an excellent motivational speaker and has delivered countless seminars and workshops on business and community development across Australia.

As Peter says “when we first saw a men’s shed, we saw a vision for perhaps the best innovation for men’s health and well-being and for development of regional, rural and remote communities, to come along in decades; it was an idea whose time had come”.