



**EDITORIAL**

The national and international policy climate is placing growing emphasis on improving the mental health status of the population. In addition to concerns about an increasing youth suicide rate, the World Health Organisation predicts

that mental illness, most notably depression, is likely to become a major health issue for Australia and many other countries into the next century.

Internationally and in Australia, there is a growing interest in adopting a public health approach to promoting the mental health of the population. This approach emphasises promoting good mental health, preventing mental health problems and disorders and early intervention. It requires a new way of thinking about mental health and its determinants, the causes of mental health problems and disorders, and about action to improve the mental health of the population.

According to the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council (AHMAC) Mental Health Working Group, new approaches need to be developed to address mental health issues and the needs of particular population groups. It has observed that the level of action to prevent the onset of mental health problems and disorders or to promote mental health is low.

We must begin to understand that mental health is fundamental to good health and quality of life, and therefore must be addressed as part of improving Australia's overall health. We have also known for some time that the concept of overall health is complex and that many activities that we have traditionally promoted as enhancing physical health also play an important role in promoting positive mental health.

This edition of VicHealth Letter looks at the contribution many of our projects make towards promoting mental well being across all community sectors.

VicHealth's involvement in mental health promotion ranges from larger scale projects to the activities of small community based organisations and theatre groups.

The growing level of concern and the lessons from public health and mental health research result in a clear case for action to promote mental health as part of the formal health agenda for action at the national, state and local levels.

VicHealth aims to take a leading role in the promotion of positive mental health by forging broad ranging partnerships with the many organisations that make a significant contribution in this area.

*Rob Moodie*

Dr Rob Moodie

# Mental Health

For many years, mental health and mental illness were treated as synonyms where the two terms would be comfortably and conveniently substituted for each other. Such confusion has led to a lack of understanding as to the precise definition of mental health.

Suggestions that mental health is the absence of mental illness are inadequate because they do not take into account that it is possible for someone with a diagnosed mental illness to experience good mental health in terms of a having a genuine sense of subjective wellbeing.

Contemporary views acknowledge a concept of health as a state of balance between self, others and the environment and as the product of a number of interrelated dimensions, including mental, physical, emotional, social, cultural and spiritual.

The importance of mental health as a requirement for good quality of life, in the maintenance of good physical health and in the recovery from physical illness is being substantiated increasingly.

## Requirements for Mental Health

The AHMAC Mental Health Working Group identifies the following outcomes of action to promote mental health. These are:

1. Improve the physical, social and economic environments that determine mental health
2. Strengthen the capacity of individuals and communities
3. Strengthen the coping capacity of people with defined health problems, including mental health problems (and/or those who care for them)
4. Reduce the incidence, prevalence and sequelae of mental health problems and disorders

Within this framework, mental health promotion refers to both the prevention of mental illness and the promotion of psychological and spiritual wellbeing. Mental health promotion interventions refer to any effort, targeted to individuals, groups or the population at large, which increase and maintain overall mental health.<sup>1</sup> The aim of such activities is to enhance competence, self-esteem, and a sense of well-being at the individual level and to address broader structures and environments that have negative mental health impacts.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Health Minister's Advisory Council.

## Mental Health in the Victorian Population

The 1995 National Health Survey (ABS 1997) collected information on general health and wellbeing including mental health.

The survey's mental health results for each State are listed in Table 1.

The National Health Survey used weighted mean scores (out of 100) to determine mental health and wellbeing across each Australian State

Results include;

- Younger people and those in higher socioeconomic groups experienced better health and wellbeing than those in other groups.
- Males scored slightly higher in all dimensions than females.
- Separated divorced or widowed men and women scored lower on mental health dimensions than those who are married or living in de facto relationships.
- Employed men and women scored highest across all mental health dimensions.
- Unemployed women scored the lowest in those dimensions related to mental health and wellbeing.
- Individuals from lower income groups scored less, indicating a poorer level of health and wellbeing.

## Mental Illness in the Victorian Population

At some stage in their lives, it is estimated that one in five Australians will experience a mental illness, varying from mild or temporary to severe or prolonged (Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services, 1998.) In a single lifetime, mental health problems and mental illness affect more than 20% of the population and between 10 to 15% of young people in any one year.

Depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder (psychoses) and eating disorders remain the predominant manifestations of psychological problems in both Victorian and Australian society today.

Schizophrenia is a serious mental illness that affects one person in a hundred. The term covers a number of related disorders, all with overlapping symptoms. However, in all types of schizophrenia, the illness interferes with the mental functioning of a person and, in the long term, may cause changes to a person's personality.

Approximately 5% of Australians experience anxiety so crippling that it affects every single aspect of their lives. Often it makes it difficult for them to hold jobs, form relationships, or enjoy normal leisure activities. Usually the anxiety begins in early adulthood and is often, but not always, triggered by a series of significant life events.

Anorexia and bulimia are the two most recognised and most serious eating disorders. Statistics vary, but anorexia is thought to affect between 1% and 2% of teenage girls. The prevalence of bulimia, which tends to affect people from the late teens on, may be as great as one in six tertiary students. Approximately 5% of people with anorexia are male, and it is thought that the incidence of bulimia amongst males is even higher.

Since the mid 1980's suicide has accounted for more deaths than transport-related injury and suicide is now the leading cause of injury death throughout Australia (NISU, 1998.) The current suicide rate in Australia is 13 deaths per 100,00 population.

Men continue to experience higher suicide rates than females in all age groups. The male rate (21 per 100,000) remains almost four times that of females (5 per 100,000.) More than half of all male suicide occurs in the age group 20 to 39 years (51%) (NISU, 1997).

TABLE 1: SF-36 profiles by state or territory

STATE/TERRITORY	GENERAL HEALTH	SOCIAL FUNCTIONING	EMOTIONAL ROLE LIMITATION	MENTAL HEALTH
	Mean score	Mean score	Mean score	Mean score
NSW	70.6	85.1	81.9	76.5
Vic	71.2	86.7	86.5	78.1
Qld	71.3	85.0	82.8	77.3
SA	70.9	85.8	84.9	77.5
WA	71.7	85.9	85.1	77.6
Tas	70.6	86.0	84.0	77.9
NT	70.4	85.5	85.5	78.9
ACT	71.3	86.1	83.4	76.2

Source: National Health Survey (1995). Summary Results Australian States and Territories. Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997.

# A Model for Creating a Healthier Community

## Mental Health in the Community

In terms of self-reported wellbeing, more than 80% of Victorians interviewed in the latest National Health Survey reported good health or better for themselves.

The last decade has seen a marked increase in the attention given to mental health policy and services at both a state and national level. Mental health consumers, carers, service providers, and a number of professional bodies have contributed to the scrutiny of what had been a relatively neglected area.

The release of Australia's first National Mental Health Policy was a milestone in the development of a national focus on mental health promotion, prevention and the provision of enhanced services for persons with mental disorder and mental health problems. (Whiteford, 1992.)

The National Mental Health Strategy aims to:

- promote the mental health of the Australian community
- where possible, prevent the development of mental health problems and mental disorders
- reduce the impact of mental disorders on individuals, families and the community
- assure the rights of people with mental disorders.

The recently released Second National Mental Health Plan (July 1998) provides the framework for mental health activities at both national and state/territory level for the next five years.

The Second National Mental Health Plan identifies three priority areas for further reform under the following themes:

- Promotion/prevention
- The development of partnerships in service reform; and
- The quality and effectiveness of service delivery

The Plan emphasises that mental health promotion activities are relevant to each of these themes.

Mental health promotion advocates describe a process whereby people cope with adversity and maintain a sense of control over their lives as resilience. Protective factors against stress are specific competencies that are necessary for the process of resilience to occur.

Some of the factors that can help an individual maintain positive wellbeing in times of stress include; the development of strong sense of self, sense of being in control of one's life, high self esteem, a positive approach to life and positive family relationships and friendships.

Mental health promotion needs to promote these competencies or healthy skills and abilities.

In addition, mental health promotion activities need to take into consideration the interdependence between the individual and their physical, socio-economic and family environments.

As some of the NHS results highlighted earlier in this report have shown, environmental factors also play a significant role in the individual's sense of positive mental health and wellbeing.

Mental health promotion activities such as those undertaken by VicHealth, in partnership with health agencies, community organisations and individuals aim to positively influence each of these determinants.

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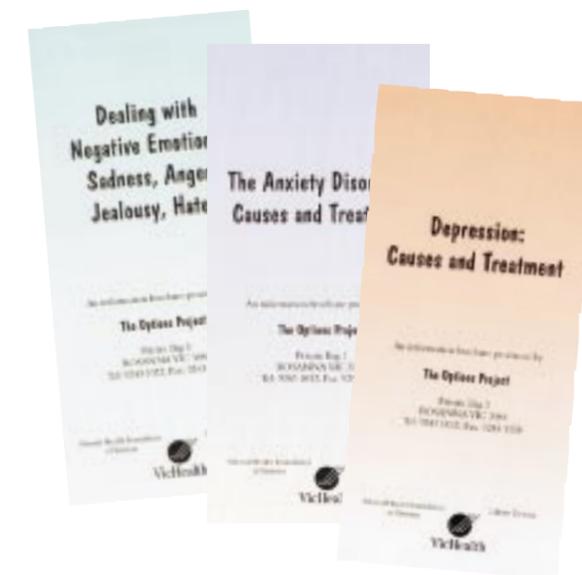
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TABLE 3: Mental disorders reported in the 1995 NHS.

	VIC	NSW	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	AUST
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Nerves, tension	2.2	1.9	2.6	2.1	2.2	2.4	*1.0	2.1	2.1
Depression	1.4	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.6	1.3	*0.7	1.9	1.3
Psychoses	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.3	*0.1	*0.3	*0.2	0.2
Emotional problems n.e.c.	0.7	0.7	1.1	0.6	0.6	0.7	*0.4	*0.6	0.7
Alcohol and drug dependence	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.8	*0.8	1.1	0.6
Mental retardation	0.7	1.0	1.1	0.9	0.7	0.8	*0.2	0.8	0.9
Other	0.4	0.6	0.8	0.7	0.9	0.6	*0.9	*0.6	0.6
Total	5.5	5.4	6.8	5.6	5.9	5.6	4.0	6.7	5.8

\* Relative standard error of 25% - 50% \*\* Relative standard error over 50%

Source: National Health Survey (1995). Summary Results Australian States and Territories. Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997.



A project that successfully tackled the issue of bullying in Victorian schools has evolved into a pilot program to address the 'mental well-being' of the general community.

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The VicHealth-funded Mental Well-being in the Community Options III Project, aims to improve mental health in the Cities of Banyule, Nillumbik and Whitehorse, through the establishment of a network linking all local agencies and services dealing with mental health issues.

Project director Dr Barry Evans believed the network would continue after the project's completion in February 1999, due to the strong support and participation of local government and local agencies. The project would also provide a well-documented 'best practice' model for other Victorian communities to adopt.

In its earlier phases, the Options Project, a project of the Mental Health Foundation of Victoria, introduced a highly successful program to combat school bullying in 360 Victorian schools. A 'Stop Bullying' video and booklet produced has been sold in more than 20 countries, and remains well used by Victorian schools.

## Seminars

The Options Project has also run a number of workshops and seminars in the region on mental health issues.

Seminars have been held on topics including stress and anxiety, problem gambling, post-natal depression, adolescent health and youth suicide, post traumatic stress disorder, coping with mental illness, substance use, educational possibilities for children with intellectual disabilities, lifestyle options for the elderly, and dealing with grief and loss.

A free full day seminar on Violence and Bullying in the Workplace funded by VicHealth has been organised by the Options Project during Mental Health Week on Monday 12 October from 9am to 3.30pm.

## Publications

Several publications addressing mental health issues have also been produced by the Options Project including brochures on depression, anxiety and dealing with negative emotions.

Other topics being developed include brochures on post natal adjustment disorder, childhood psychosis, understanding stress/stress management and adolescent coping.

To book for the *Violence and Bullying in the Workplace Seminar* or for further information on any aspects of the Options Projects telephone (03) 9243 1032.

# Club Creates Safe Environment for Young Women

At first, they came to the swimming pool in t-shirts and long shorts, sitting on the edges and dangling their feet in the water; young women whose self-esteem had been badly bruised by life.

But by the end of the 12-month 'Y Club' program, the same young women were down to their bathers, enjoying their private swimming sessions and being comfortable in their environment.

"This was possible because the program had created a safe environment for them," said Vanessa Halge, Manager of Anglicare Preston's Accommodation and Support Services. "Providing a safe environment plays an important role in any healing and identity recovery process."

Many of the participants in the 'Y' Club were in dire need of support and companionship.

The program was developed by Anglicare's Napier Young Women's Lifeskills Program, as a club for young women between 13 and 18 who were homeless or living in out-of-home care. Many were survivors of sexual violence and had mental health and self-esteem issues. Most did not go to school or work. VicHealth provided funding through an Active for Life community grant.

Once a week for a year, an average of between five and 10 young women attended the club, participating in a wide variety of activities including self-defence lessons, mural painting, table tennis, circus skills and outings as well as peer-education and leadership training.

"The aim was that through regular physical and self-development activities, participants would be encouraged to feel good about themselves and increase their self-esteem, enabling better health and quality of life," Ms Halge said.

"One of the key objectives was about providing these young women with a safe place to have some fun and take some risks. The program provided the opportunity to reduce feelings of isolation and address the blame young women often carry about being the victims of sexual abuse."

At each meeting, participants were also provided with a healthy meal, and the link between a healthy body and a healthy mind was discussed.

The project continued after its funding period, but issues around safe transportation for the young women to and from the club need to be addressed in any future program.

*For further information contact: Vanessa Halge at Anglicare Victoria Preston on (03) 9478 9633.*



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# Body Image Gets Physical

**"Many women are missing out on the well-documented mental health benefits of exercise - which also include improved self-esteem, sleeping patterns and concentration - because of body image dissatisfaction."**

Ever looked in the mirror and decided you're not going to the gym or swimming pool until you've dropped some weight here, firmed up a little there? You're not alone.

According to Body Image and Health Inc, funded by VicHealth, body image dissatisfaction is a major barrier to exercise for many people, particularly women.

One of the findings to come out of recent qualitative research conducted by the organisation was that some women aged between 14 and 30 believed they had to achieve a certain body weight or ideal before they could go the gym, or begin an exercise program.

"It can be likened to people who clean the house before the house cleaner comes," says Body Image's Program Manager Thea O'Connor. "It's particularly an issue when exercise involves taking clothes off, or wearing tight-fitting gym wear."

Ironically, research has generally found that people who exercise have a more positive perception of their bodies than those who do not.

Ms O'Connor says many women are missing out on the well-documented mental health benefits of exercise - which also include improved self-esteem, sleeping patterns and concentration - because of body image dissatisfaction.

One of the ways in which the VicHealth-funded program is tackling this issue is by working closely with the Victorian fitness industry.

The overall aim is to assist fitness professionals to become more aware of their role and responsibility in relation to their clients' body image, and to create comfortable exercise environments for people "of all shapes, sizes, ages and fitness levels".

"Currently the gym culture is intimidating for many and it can increase people's obsession about body shape, making them feel worse about themselves, rather than better," says Ms O'Connor.

"Too much emphasis is placed on weight-loss and body-shaping through exercise at gyms and fitness centres. While regular physical activity has been found to be important in maintaining weight loss, it does not produce large or rapid weight or fat loss in the short-term."

Both the fitness industry and its clients needed to place less emphasis on weight-loss as a primary motivator for participation, she said.

"When participation in exercise fails to achieve rapid or large changes in body weight or shape, this can leave the person feeling disheartened or unmotivated to continue, especially if the exercise pattern adopted is too rigid, strenuous or unpleasant."

Greater emphasis needed to be placed on other health benefits, both physical and mental, of regular physical activity.



In partnership with the Victorian Council on Fitness and General Health (VicFit), Body Image and Health has been running a series of training sessions for fitness professionals on body image, promoting the message that 'fit and healthy people can come in a range of shapes and sizes.'

Body Image and Health is also developing a position paper on 'Body Image and the Role of Fitness Professionals' which it aims to distribute widely within the profession and wider community to generate awareness and discussion.

The paper includes practical guidelines for identifying and dealing with clients affected by poor body image and its potential consequences, such as excessive exercise and disordered eating habits.

Also as part of the project, a Melbourne fitness centre is trialling the use of more 'body image friendly' marketing messages to see if this approach has a positive impact on membership retention.

## Models versus reality

You don't have to be Einstein to figure that the average size of models usually shown in the media does not correlate with the average-sized Australian.

Body Image and Health also continues to work with the media and fashion industry to encourage a greater responsibility towards body image issues, and for more retailers and designers to cater for a greater range of body shapes and sizes.

At the recent Melbourne Fashion Festival, Ms O'Connor told an audience of 1,000 that they were failing to cater to the average-sized Australian.

"At the end of the day, it is only real people, not fantasies, that buy your clothes," she told the audience.

Ms O'Connor urged the industry representatives to see that being sensitive to body image concerns was helpful to their industry.

*For copies of the 'Position Paper on Body Image and Fitness Professionals', or for further information on other activities of Body Image and Health Inc., telephone (03) 9344 2668.*

# Learning About Family Life in the classroom

While the project's primary aim is to promote the mental health of families, teachers have found that the materials provided also strengthen students' social skills and literacy skills.

A Victorian year five student going through a traumatic experience was talking to her teacher about ways in which she could help herself through the difficult time.

"Could I write a journal like my Healthy Families one?" the young girl herself suggested. She began carrying with her everywhere what she called her 'special book', to write down her thoughts and feelings.

Thousands of Victorian schoolchildren participating in the Healthy Families Project have learned important new skills and ways of thinking about and dealing with their family life.

Funded by VicHealth and managed by the Victorian Board of Studies for the past three years, the project aims to improve the quality of family relationships for children and parents by encouraging students to understand the ways in which patterns of parenting are passed on from generation to generation, and to appreciate the diversity of family experience.

The program received glowing reviews from the year five and six students and teachers at the 51 Victorian primary schools who participated in a pilot in 1997. It draws extensively on activities devised around children's novels and an Australian Children's Television Foundation Video documenting the lifestyles of a wide variety of Australian families.

"The activities are designed to help children reflect on their own experiences through a combination of group discussions, role plays and various forms of writing, including a confidential journal," explained Project Director Gerry Tickell.

While the project's primary aim is to promote the mental health of families, teachers have found that the materials provided also strengthen students' social skills and literacy skills.

"It's very powerful material," said Mr Tickell. "The content touches the children's lives in a way which allows them to explore family issues in a safe environment. It's a non-threatening means of showing students that negative parenting patterns don't have to be repeated."

Schools who have participated in the project have reported improved relationships in the classrooms, between teachers and students and among students themselves.

"The way we interact with each other is better," said one teacher whose class participated in the pilot program. "You never hear one kid put another kid down now, which I find absolutely amazing."

The Healthy Families Project was last year awarded "VicHealth's Most Successful Schools Health Program Award for 1997".

At the end of its pilot stage, a formal evaluation by Deakin University said the Healthy Families Project Team "was to be congratulated on producing what is obviously a landmark program in the area of mental health education".

*For further information contact: Delyce Dalton on (03) 9651 4621 or Dale Constable on (03) 9651 4620.*



## Being Active for Life at MSAC

Regular physical activity is good for the mind as well as the body, as the 1.5 million visitors who have flocked to the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre (MSAC) since it opened in July last year have found.

Most of these visitors have been active participants in the smorgasbord of sporting opportunities on offer at the Centre.

"Our newest sports Centre has become arguably the most patronised sports facility in the country," said Chief Executive Officer Simon Weatherill. "It's playing a big role in making Victorians both physically and emotionally healthy in their everyday lives."

VicHealth has helped MSAC establish itself as a Model Health Promoting Venue, through its sponsorship of the Centre promoting the Active for Life message.

The Active for Life message aims to encourage more Victorians to take up regular physical activity to improve their physical and mental well-being and to reduce their risk of heart disease and cancer. Exercise also helps ease stress, depression and anxiety and improve sleep patterns and general well-being.

"There really is something for all parts of the community here, giving everyone the opportunity to be Active for Life in their own way," said Mr Weatherill. "The centre's success is also due to having so many sporting facilities under the one roof, giving patrons the opportunity to try something new while they're here for one thing."

Basketball, volleyball, table tennis, squash, badminton, diving, swimming, volleyball, raquetball and water polo are among the sports on offer, and there's also a well-equipped fitness centre offering a range of aerobics classes and weight training facilities.

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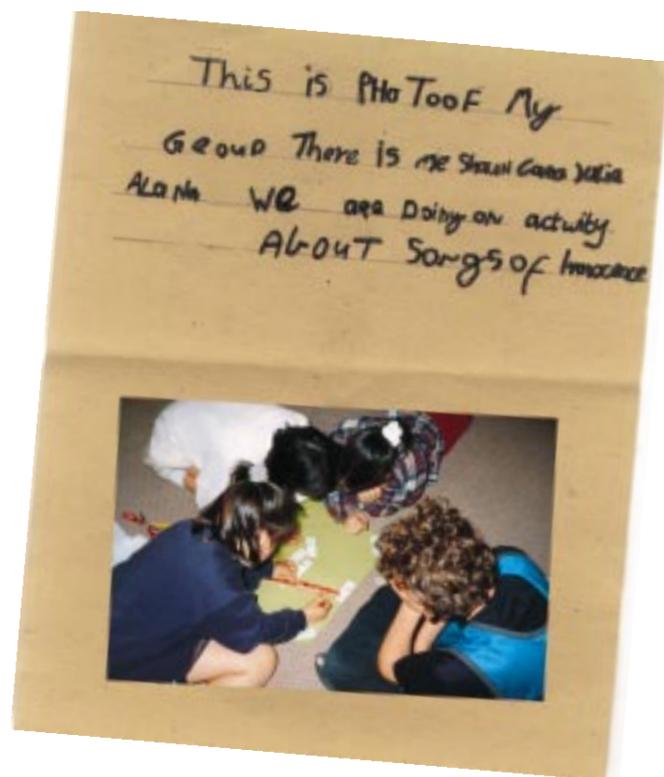
The centre's four pools have proved its most popular facility, with more than 600,000 visitors taking a dip in the centre's first year. The pool was followed in popularity by basketball (278,000), health and fitness centre (180,000), badminton (90,000), table tennis (71,000) and squash (50,000).

Another 90,000 visitors attended major events including the World Under 23 Basketball Championships, the Australian Swimming Championships as well as the national table tennis, squash and badminton championships.

An average of 4,200 visitors attend the Centre every day, many coming with other family members.

Forthcoming events at MSAC include the World Junior Badminton Championships (3-11 October)

*For further information contact: Mr Simon Weatherill at MSAC on (03) 9926 1555.*



# Table Tennis

## Keeps Bodies & Minds Sharp

“It’s a great sport for women,” Mr Lockwood says. “It’s non-contact, good exercise, requires quick reaction, it’s social and it’s cheap to play.”



Joan Guggenheim, 74  
Winner Asian Veterans' Singles Championship

“I’m thinking madly all the time,” says Graham Lockwood of playing table tennis. “It keeps me alert both on my feet and in my thinking.”

As Executive Director of Table Tennis Victoria, Mr Lockwood is naturally a big fan of the sport which has more than 300,000 regular participants in Australia. In Victoria, players of all ages take part in either competitions or coaching six days a week at the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre and other locations across the state.

VicHealth in partnership with the Arthritis Foundation supports Table Tennis Victoria through an Active for Life sponsorship, in recognition of the physical and mental health benefits of the sport.

Among a range of initiatives to encourage more Victorians of all ages to take up the sport, Table Tennis Victoria is busy introducing nursing home residents to table tennis.

Joan Guggenheim, a champion veteran player, regularly constructs a make-shift table tennis table from several small dining tables in order to teach the game to residents.

“We aim to get people in the homes to realise that they can play a sport, and that it can help them keep physically active and interested,” says Mr Lockwood. “It’s proving a very popular program.”

Joan Guggenheim, who won the Asian Veterans Singles Championship at the age of 74, is a positive role model for the benefits of table tennis for older people. “She’s got a mind as agile as her table tennis,” says Mr Lockwood. “When I tease her and ask when she’s going to retire, she says, ‘Table tennis keeps my mind going’.”

Another push is to encourage more women to take up the sport, with currently only 20% of Victorian participants being women. “It’s a great sport for women,” Mr Lockwood says. “It’s non-contact, good exercise, requires quick reaction, it’s social and it’s cheap to play. It’s a sport that absolutely everyone can participate in.”

Women and men wanting to give table tennis a go can attend the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre on Monday nights from 8pm and receive two hours of coaching and playing time, or join a social group on Monday mornings from 10am to 12noon. There are also opportunities to play competition table tennis at several different levels from Tuesday through to Friday night.

Friday night features a popular social competition for players over 40, and there is coaching for juniors on Saturday afternoons from 3-5pm.

*For further information contact Graham Lockwood at Table Tennis Victoria on (03) 9682 2011.*

“The main aims of our project are to promote and enhance the wellbeing of families of Cambodian background, particularly in the area of parent-adolescent relationships....”



## Promoting Resilient Cambodian Families

The Springvale Community Health Centre will work closely with the local Cambodian community to develop a program which aims to strengthen the capacity of parents to provide support to children and youths ‘at risk’.

The VicHealth funded program is a joint initiative of the Springvale Community Health Centre, the Cambodian Association of Victoria and the Springvale Secondary College, of which 21% of its total student population is Cambodian.

Drug-use and the rate of school drop-out among Cambodian youth was disproportionately high among the youth of the region, according to Project Director Bala Mudaly.

Mr Mudaly said the local Cambodian community was in urgent need of focused support to enhance its capacity to address “the large scale disaffection of young people from this community and the consequent despair of parents”.

“There is much consternation, sense of powerlessness and grief among parents and families of Cambodian background about the disaffection and high-risk practices of many young people in their community,” he said.

“The main aims of our project are to promote and enhance the wellbeing of families of Cambodian background, particularly in the area of parent-adolescent relationships, and to improve the risk-taking lifestyles of young persons, particularly in regard to drug use and self-harm, including suicides.”

A recent forum held with members of the local Cambodian community showed strong support for the program whose key element was to encourage and support the emergence of a group of skilled parent leaders.

A reference group of parents from the community will be recruited to help direct the program and to develop appropriate materials for promotion and use in presentations and forums.

Small parent groups targeting parents of high-risk adolescents will cover themes including: Handling stress and problem-solving, supporting young people through situations such as depression, anger, drug withdrawal, drug overdose, problems with the police and the legal system, and school drop-out.

Mr Mudaly believed a large proportion of the local Cambodian community would be positively affected at the end of the 12-month project. Elements of the model developed would also be of relevance to other ethnic communities.

*For further information contact: Mr Bala Mudaly at the Springvale Community Health Service on (03) 9548 3255.*

# Mobilising Communities in Support of Mothers

*"I found it difficult to rest during the first few months. My husband works long hours and I had many minor problems after birth - milk fever, sore episiotomy, severe haemorrhoids, gastro. It would have been helpful if I had some child care for the older children (3 and 4 years) here and there." (Joanne)*

*"For the first eight months we were just so tired. At one stage we were throwing things at each other and we've never done that before, since or at any other time." (Kate)*

Improving the emotional and physical health of mothers like Joanne and Kate is the aim of a five year public health project, partly funded by VicHealth.

The PRISM Project (Program of Resources, Information and Support for Mothers) is being conducted in 16 municipalities around Victoria by the Centre for the Study of Mothers' and Children's Health at La Trobe University.

Its primary aim is to reduce the prevalence of depression and physical health problems in mothers 6-9 months after birth, and to reduce the proportion of women still depressed 18-21 months later in the eight communities randomised to receive an intervention program.

The project will evaluate a range of strategies designed to improve recognition and treatment of depression and common physical health problems....

The project will evaluate a range of strategies designed to improve recognition and treatment of depression and common physical health problems, listening skills of doctors and maternal and child health nurses, and the availability of social support and 'time out' for women with young children.

"Depression and physical health problems after childbirth are significant health issues affecting large numbers of Victorian women," said PRISM coordinator Stephanie Brown.

"During pregnancy everyone is very focused on the mothers' health, but once the baby is born, attention generally switches to the baby. Maternal health problems are frequently under recognised, and women tend to be reticent about asking for help."

In research conducted by the Centre and funded by VicHealth it was shown that 24 percent of mothers with babies 7-9 months old were experiencing urinary incontinence, yet less than 5% of these women had talked to a doctor or child maternal health nurse about the problem.

Other research conducted by Dr Jane Gunn, an associate investigator on PRISM, had shown that GPs felt under confident about dealing with some of the common health problems experienced by mothers.

The PRISM project will directly address these issues with strategies designed to improve the confidence and listening skills of GPs.

The project has been funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council, VicHealth and the Department of Human Services.

The sixteen municipalities taking part in PRISM are:

In Melbourne: City of Bayside, Shire of Cardinia, City of Maroondah, Shire of Melton, City of Moonee Valley, Shire of Mornington Peninsula, City of Stonnington, City of Wyndham.

In rural Victoria: City of Greater Bendigo, City of Campaspe, Shire of Glenelg, La Trobe Shire, City of Greater Shepparton, Rural City of Swan Hill, City of Warrnambool, Shire of Wellington.

*For further information on PRISM contact Stephanie Brown or Rhonda Small on (03) 9348 1211 bh.*



More than six months after the program's completion, several of the women still meet regularly to walk, talk and further the friendships which developed during the program.

## Walking to Friendship & Health

When Ionela "Nelly" Buzato arrived in Melbourne nine years ago to marry her Romanian-born fiancée, she could not speak any English.

"The first two years were really difficult while I learned the language," she said. "It was difficult to find a job and to fit in, even though I tried to copy so many things."

As she met other Romanian-born women living in Melbourne, Mrs Buzato found she was not alone in her experience. Through her involvement with the Romanian Society of Australia, she began to explore ways to help other women like herself, as well as those who had arrived as refugees.

Last year the Chadstone-based society received a VicHealth Active for Life community grant to run a program especially for Romanian women living in Melbourne.

The grant funded a free series of activities and health information sessions including aerobics, traditional Romanian dancing and discussions on topics including healthy eating, breast examinations and the health effects of smoking. There was even a group visit to a nurse for Pap smear tests.

"The women felt much more comfortable going along for a Pap test with other women, and they were assured knowing the nurse was a woman," said Mrs Buzato. "We asked all the women to come out from their test smiling, and they did!"

One of the most popular activities proved to be 'coffee and walking' meetings, which saw the group of up to 34 women going on excursions into places like the Botanical Gardens, the city and bush-walking in Ferntree Gully.

More than six months after the program's completion, several of the women still meet regularly to walk, talk and further the friendships which developed during the program.

The women, aged from 23 to 70, came from right across Melbourne to take part in the fortnightly sessions which were mainly held at the Dandenong Arts Centre and advertised through Romanian-speaking media, brochures and word-of-mouth.

"The social aspect of the meetings were very important, and it gave us the opportunity to share any of our worries about our lives and our health," Mrs Buzato said.

*For further information contact: Mrs Ionela Buzato on (03) 9531 8376.*



# Grief and Loss Runs Deep in Rural Victoria

“Our main aim is to look at how we can enhance existing services in the community by helping providers feel more confident to advertise their services as well as how to facilitate greater networking.”



The loss of loved ones is not the only issue causing grief in rural Victoria.

A new VicHealth funded project ‘Enhancing Supports for Grief and Loss in Rural Communities’ in Bendigo is finding other causes of grief and loss as it explores ways to enhance training and support for those working in a field more often associated with bereavement.

Changing economic conditions, infrastructure and the decline of generations of farming are among the issues bubbling to the surface and manifesting in various symptoms in rural communities, according to Project Worker Barry Taylor.

“Some of these stresses on the community are being manifested in the rural political backlash we are experiencing at the moment. In other cases, people are presenting to their health practitioners with physical symptoms which they don’t necessarily name as grief and loss, but which often have an underlying theme of grief and loss connected to the deterioration of morale in the community.”

The project is a joint initiative of the National Association of Loss and Grief and the Centre for Grief Education in Victoria, who identified the need for greater training and support to be provided in rural areas for those professionals working in the field of loss and grief.

In rural Victoria, this often means a range of non-specialist providers including general practitioners, community health centres, mental health services and churches.

To date, 25 Bendigo organisations and individuals have been involved in the early stages of the 12-month project which have been largely concerned with consultation, during which providers identified some of the issues they were dealing with, and their specific needs for training and support.

“Our main aim is to look at how we can enhance existing services in the community by helping providers feel more confident to advertise their services as well as how to facilitate greater networking,” Mr Taylor said.

“I’ve been struck by the commitment shown to the project, with more and more workers seeing grief in their work and wanting to enhance their capacity to work with it.”

Participants had expressed appreciation that such a project was being offered in rural Victoria, and he believed one of the project’s recommendations would be for continuing support to be provided to rural workers.

*For further information on the Enhancing Supports for Grief and Loss in Rural Communities project please contact Barry Taylor on (03) 9421 0580.*

## Flying the Flag for



The recent flying of the Aboriginal flag in Wodonga has fanned the beginnings of a new level of community awareness of Koori culture in the region.

The ceremony, attended by the Mayor and several council workers as well as members of the local Koori community, was organised as part of a VicHealth-funded project to address the mental, emotional and spiritual health of the Wodonga and District Koori community, particularly its women.

“The profile of the community is certainly being raised through activities such as the flag-raising ceremony, visits to schools and involvement in ‘Sorry Day’ activities,” said Charmaine Farrell, special project worker with NEWomen Goulburn North Eastern Women’s Health Service, which is responsible for the project.

“The community has many issues of loss and grief to deal with, with the issues of separation from family and traditional community being particularly prevalent. For Aboriginal people there is an association between mental ill health and separation from the family in childhood, due to loss of support networks and cultural understanding,” Ms Farrell said.

The Koori Cultural Regeneration Project is bringing together the local Koorie community to share cultural knowledge and understanding, among both the Koorie population of between 300 and 500, and the broader community.

“The project aims to strengthen the community in terms of its Aboriginal identity, and to increase understanding and foster pride in its Aboriginal heritage,” Ms Farrell said.

It follows the Wodonga and District Koori Well Women’s Project in 1996, also coordinated by NEWomen and funded by VicHealth, in which participants identified a lack of cultural knowledge as being a key issue of concern.

To address this, the project is drawing on the knowledge of local Aboriginal elders who have been sought out to share their



## Koori Cultural Regeneration

“The project aims to strengthen the community in terms of its Aboriginal identity, and to increase understanding and foster pride in its Aboriginal heritage.”

knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture, including bush tucker, Dreamtime stories, traditional dance and other forms of cultural expression.

“At one seminar at the Wodonga College of Education, a local Aboriginal elder opened the session with a smoking ceremony,” said Ms Farrell.

Leonie McIntosh, a young Koori woman who grew up in the region, has been employed as a project officer and has already organised more than 20 cultural awareness sessions with local Aboriginal people, as well as in several schools.

“The project has provided a pivotal focus for local culture, with Leonie’s own knowledge about such diverse aspects as bush tucker, sacred sites, traditional dances and customs as well as art forms such as basket weaving being an extraordinary bonus,” said Ms Farrell. “She’s getting a great reception within the Koori community and in local schools who keep on making requests for her to come and talk to them.”

The 12-month project has also identified the need for local Koori workers to be provided with greater support, resulting in coordinated trips to local sites of Aboriginal significance allowing workers to increase their knowledge about the geography, history and culture of the region.

All members of the local Aboriginal community are being included in the project’s activities. Up to 20 young Koories are involved in developing a mural displaying traditional and local Aboriginal images. It is also hoped that a successful ‘women’s business’ session will soon be followed by a ‘men’s business’ session led by three Aboriginal men, one an elder.

*For further information contact Charmaine Farrell at NEWomen Goulburn North Eastern Women’s Health Service on (03) 57223009*

# Creating 'Connexions'

## for young people in trouble

A key element of the Connexions Mental Health Project, funded by VicHealth over two years, was to raise awareness of the needs and issues of these young people among the inner city health agencies .....

'Tony' was 19 when he took an almost fatal heroin overdose. Just days before, a mental health agency had informed him they couldn't help him until he 'cleaned up his act'. Then the drug and alcohol agency he turned to said they couldn't work with him until his mental illness had been treated.

He was just one of the troubled Victorian youths with both a drug and alcohol problem and a mental illness, (commonly known as 'dual diagnosis' or 'dual disorder') to fall through the system.

Until recently, too many such young people - many who were also homeless - were failing to get the help they needed, according to David Murray of the Connexions Mental Health Education Project run by the Jesuit Social Services.

"Access to clinical services for these kids was very difficult," he said. "They tended to be excluded because of the definition of their problem."

A key element of the Connexions Mental Health Project, funded by VicHealth over two years, was to raise awareness of the needs and issues of these young people among the inner city health agencies and workers who dealt with them, and to develop strategies to deal with any gaps in treatment.

The project culminated in the successful convening of the First National Conference on Problematic Substance Use and Mental Illness in Melbourne in February, attended by 450 delegates from across Australia, including 40 consumers.

A set of recommendations from the conference was later presented to Dr Harvey Whiteford, Head of Mental Health for the Commonwealth Government, and a keynote speaker at the conference.

"We had several discussions about the recommendations with Dr Whiteford, and were very warmly received. We're hopeful that many of those recommendations will be reflected in the new National Mental Health Strategy, soon to be released," Mr Murray said.

"The VicHealth funding was central to convening the first national conference which we hope will have a substantial impact on national mental health policy in relation to young people with dual disorder."

*For further information on Connexions contact David Murray or Marie Tehan on 9499 2518.*



Connexions Mental Health Project Staff  
David Murray, Dr. Heather Manning, David Chong



# Blood & Bone

## gets to the heart of menopause

"Thanks for a show that did more for my wellbeing than Hormone Replacement Therapy."

This was just one positive response to the play "Blood and Bone" which recently toured Victoria, dealing with the losses and gains of menopause in an hour-long production featuring a cast of four and large doses of humour.

Writer and director Pauline Hosking was stunned by response to her play which received VicHealth funding to tour 20 centres throughout the outer metropolitan area of Melbourne and regional areas.

"It was very moving," she said. "At the end of the play women would grab us by the arm and tell us how much they needed to see that (the play). Then they'd often tell us their own story about their experience of menopause."

"I think the response was because menopause hadn't been talked about so openly and positively in such a way. While Blood and Bone doesn't underestimate the anxiety and distress felt by many women, it presents menopause as one more stage in a woman's life. After all, most women these days have 30 or 40 years to enjoy after menopause."

Many women, she said, suffered in silence with symptoms of menopause, with 20 % experiencing symptoms badly enough to interrupt their daily routine.

A friend going through 'an extremely difficult menopause' alerted Ms Hosking to the need for menopause to 'come out of the closet'. "She said, 'Why aren't you writing about something important - about what's happening to me!'"

"It was very moving," she said. "At the end of the play women would grab us by the arm and tell us how much they needed to see that (the play)."

After two years of research, the play was written, reflecting Ms Hosking's new understanding. "Menopause is one of the many things that happen to women in mid-life," she said. "I think it's important to view this time positively, as another cycle in our development. It is certainly not a sign that women's lives are over."

Blood and Bone was mostly staged at community health centres as part of a women's health day, and included healthy food options for audiences, as well as talks about the benefits of exercise in dealing with the symptoms of menopause and the weight-gain often experienced with this stage of life.

It was supported by the Arthritis Foundation as part of VicHealth's Active for Life sponsorship, also allowing for the provision of information on osteoporosis and arthritis to audiences.

*For further information on "Blood and Bone" contact Pauline Hosking on (03) 5968 3849.*





# Raising the Curtains on Suicide & Drug Use

## Life Crashes Through Barriers

**“The project was designed to explore the rich rehabilitative possibilities of the creative arts for people seriously affected by mental illness.”**

Caroline was an artist before she developed a disabling mental illness. “I felt like my illness stripped away my artistic talent leaving me bare,” she said.

When the opportunity arose for Caroline to take part in a puppet street theatre project of SANE Australia (Schizophrenia Australia Foundation), she was amazed to rediscover her creativity and confidence.

Caroline was one of the 20 members of the Bromham Place Clubhouse (a rehabilitation program of the Schizophrenia Fellowship of Victoria) who worked with Snuff Puppets, a giant puppet company, to create a street-theatre piece called Riot of Life.

“It has always been my dream to make puppets and this dream came true,” said Caroline. “It’s not very often that dreams come true when you’re feeling unwell.”

Riot of Life was seen by thousands of people in various locations in Melbourne and some regional centres. VicHealth provided funding for work shopping and performances of the show during Mental Health Week in 1997.

“The performers made a serious contribution to helping break down the barriers of misunderstanding and stigma about mental illness in the wider community,” said Barbara Hocking, Executive Director of SANE Australia.

“The project was designed to explore the rich rehabilitative possibilities of the creative arts for people seriously affected by mental illness,” she said.

The performances gave participants the rare opportunity to celebrate and share their achievements with family and friends, as well as a wider audience.

“It is great to realise that the audience is able to enjoy and relate to something created by people with a mental illness, and to know that there are people out there who are willing to listen and understand,” said Anne, one of the performers.

The health benefits of the project also extended to the physical, with participants taking part in regular exercise at rehearsals, and eating healthy food.

“Weight gain can be one unwelcome side-effect of medication for people with schizophrenia and quite a few of the participants lost weight by undertaking regular physical activity,” Ms Hocking said.

The production was the story of a man who finds his imagination and unleashes the ‘riot of life’ inside his head.

The puppets created were highly individual and creative. They included the ‘Long-Faced Man’ by Alistair, who said the puppet depicted how he felt about his experiences of schizophrenia and depression when he was being treated.

The performances also attracted significant media coverage, helping to create further community awareness of schizophrenia.

“In an era where the role of the creative arts as a therapeutic process seems to be almost ignored, this project provides a timely reminder that rehabilitation programs come in a number of forms,” Ms Hocking said.

*For further information contact Barbara Hocking, SANE Australia on (03) 9682 5933.*

A theatre company touring regional Victoria deals directly with the confronting issues of suicide and drug use.

And the audiences - filled with young people and parents - are listening.

Somebody’s Daughter Theatre Company creates theatre work around the issues of drug awareness and harm minimisation, self-esteem and suicide prevention. The company involves past and present women prisoners and professional theatre practitioners.

When audiences see performances or participate in workshops, they know the actors speak from personal experience.

“The fact that our actors all speak with experience and authority on these issues makes young people at risk feel confident in speaking with them,” said Artistic Director Maud Clarke.

“The dramatisation and context that information is presented in often stays with people much longer than the information read or delivered out of a context of emotional engagement with characters.”

VicHealth has provided funding for a regional tour of Tell Her That I Love Her featuring performances in several regional centres, following the success of a small tour to the north-east of Victoria.



“The fact that many young people flock to the city highlights the difficulties young people face in resolving personal problems, particularly those that are drug-related, in their own regional centres,” said Ms Clarke.

“Our performances bring home the importance of not trying to pretend these problems don’t exist in the country, and that there are real health dangers if regional community agencies, schools and youth programs do not make information and support relevant and available to young people.”

“Our performances and workshops educate the workers and agencies who deal directly with young people, creating a bridge of support for young people to cross.”

## Health Food for the soul

“Theatre is health food for the soul,” according to Albury-Wodonga’s HotHouse Theatre.

As part of a VicHealth Active for Life sponsorship, Hothouse Theatre in partnership with the Upper Hume Community Health Service in Wodonga, actively promotes the message to its audiences in a myriad of ways.

“We believe that good health is a complete state of physical, social and emotional wellbeing and that theatre plays an integral part in creating this well being,” says HotHouse Marketing Manager Jodie Kensington.

The company creates opportunities for audiences from non-English speaking backgrounds, people with disabilities and people of low socio-economic status to see live performances.

“Hothouse is continually searching for ways to deliver a health message at our venue, the Butter Factory Theatre,” Ms Kensington said.

During performances of a production called Waterworks earlier this year, tickets were provided for clients from the community health service’s Domestic Violence and Psychiatric Disabilities Day Program, which proved a huge hit. This arrangement has now become a permanent booking for every season of plays.

*For further information contact Jodie Kensington at HotHouse Theatre on (02) 6021 7433 or Patience Harrington at the Upper Hume Community Health Service on (02) 605 61550.*



**Australian International Summer School in Health Promotion**

February 1-12 1999

The International Summer School program is on again next year. The training program is based on the VicHealth model of health promotion concentrating on population groups, risk factors and health promotion in settings.

The program is designed for a wide range of health professionals and the course will include lectures from leading academics and practitioners including Special Guest Lecturer, Dr Ron Labonte, author and Canadian Health Promotion Consultant, group discussions, site visits as well as a full social program.

Fees include course work, accommodation and sightseeing.

For more information please contact Peter Thompson at VicHealth on Tel: 61 3 9345 3250  
Fax: 61 3 9345 3222 or email [HYPERLINK](mailto:HYPERLINK) mail to: [pthompson@vichealth.vic.gov.au](mailto:pthompson@vichealth.vic.gov.au)

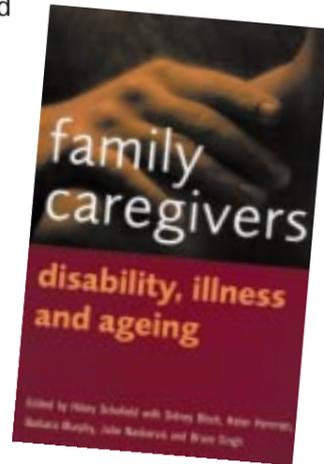
**VicHealth is proud to announce the launch of a new publication:**

Family Caregivers: Disability, Illness & Ageing, Edited by Hilary Schofield with Sidney Bloch, Helen Herrman, Barbara Murphy, Julie Nankervis and Bruce Singh.

On October 9 The Minister for Health, the Hon. Rob Knowles MLC, and the Governor of Victoria, His Excellency Sir James Gobbo and VicHealth Chief Executive Officer, Dr Rob Moodie, will jointly launch this important new book.

The book is the result of a VicHealth funded research project that surveyed 26,000 households about family caregivers. Written in an accessible style, it is a welcome voice for all those who contribute a vital community service but whose concerns are all too little acknowledged. The book also provides vital information for the creation and maintenance of policies to support those who, for far too long have had to bare the burden with inadequate assistance.

Available direct from VicHealth  
Price \$34.95 including postage.



**Celebrating Health**

**VicHealth's Partnerships in Health Industry Events:**

22 September 1998

Getting it Right! Balancing Work, Home and Self Innovative and creative strategies for both individuals, families and organisations which will assist in reducing stress, guilt, absenteeism, staff turnover and improve the quality of work/family life. Further information contact Lisa Pittard, VicHealth Partnerships program on 9 345 3223.

**VicHealth Strategic Planning Retreat**

The Minister for Health, the Hon. Rob Knowles MLC, Department of Human Services, Secretary, Warren McCann and Department of Human Services, Director of Public Health and Development, John Catford attended a VicHealth strategic planning workshop held earlier this month.

The workshop provided an opportunity for the Minister and senior Human Services personnel to meet with the VicHealth Board, committee representatives and associates to discuss future strategic directions for its health promotion activities.

The workshop is part of a wider strategic planning process being undertaken by the Foundation.

Over the past year, the Foundation has welcomed a new Chair, Professor John Funder, Chief Executive Dr. Rob Moodie and new Board and Committee representatives.

VicHealth's 10 years of achievement, celebrated last year, has also signalled an opportune time to articulate a new vision for the next decade.



**VICHEALTH**  
**LETTER**



**MENTAL HEALTH**

- CONNEXIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
- CONFRONTING GRIEF AND LOSS
- CREATING HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES
- BODY IMAGE GETS PHYSICAL
- BETTER SELF ESTEEM