

Australian Men's Shed Conference. August 23-25 - 2009



With financial assistance from the Hamilton Community Men's Shed and approval from the Melville High School Principal, I was able to attend the 2009 three day biennial, 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Men's Shed Association conference held at the Wrest Point Conference Centre in Hobart. After a wonderful flight from NZ to Melbourne and then on to Hobart –Hobart emerged as a beautiful harbour-side city, possibly more extensive than Wellington Harbour, with a slightly smaller “Auckland Harbour” type Bridge at the northern end. The “Tasman Bridge” as it is known crosses the Derwent River that flows from the North towards the mouth of the Bay in the south. A large rocky backdrop of Mount Wellington towers 1270 metres West of the bay over looking the city and the

bridge where in 1975 a disaster unfolded within seconds. **A huge bridge pylon was smashed by a ship below which then sank under the weight of a massive concrete bridge-span which collapsed plunging cars into the river. Thirteen were killed severing Hobart's vital road link over the Derwent River to the Airport and north for many months.**

After a brief opening speech on the Sunday evening, I joined over 170 delegates and three other New Zealanders to a trade display and chance to mingle and chat. Having visited several sheds through out Australia earlier in April as a part of a Winston Churchill Fellowship, I was able to rekindle contacts with a number of Shed representatives from Perth to the East Coast. Our New Zealand delegation, represented a good cross section of NZ sheds, which I have calculated would now total upwards of 10 sites – One had yet to be built and become operational, two were firmly



underway, and our Shed in Hamilton has been in the process of reinvented itself after we lost our first temporary venue. Ailsa Carey from REAP Blenheim, Picton Men's Shed; Arthur Buckland, Waiuku, Franklin Men's Shed; and

Trevor Scott from Oxford Area School, Oxford Men's Shed joined with me to gather ideas for implementation in our sheds in New Zealand. The theme “Where to from Here?” seemed to focus predominantly on those sheds that were already in existence and several Key Note Addresses were focused on Men's Health rather than the startup tips and procedures that I recalled from the previous conference in 2007.

I was satisfied with the conference as a whole, however, with a change made from the original dates, heralded for some earlier in the year, two of our group needed to fork out more for flights

to get return travel on altered dates. Of particular benefit to us all were the new ideas and stories of success in the shed movement – the projects and initiatives that springboard off a shed being a community venture with unique people and physical resources. The diversity of sheds was amazing to learn about. Some began as a Drop-in Centre if they had no facility or venue to do trade type activities in. Some had programmes to support new migrants retain their culture and develop confidence in a second, third or fourth language. Others sheds in existence for a number of years had established programmes that linked in with Schools, Justice Programmes, mentoring opportunities, and other unique marketing projects. Some were even exploring the extent to which training could be offered in conjunction with more informal shed programmes. Most had developed significant links with various health providers and agencies who are quick to acknowledge large numbers of men attend sheds where they don't feel quite as bad at talking about health issues arising from discussion when they are doing something practical for themselves or others.

For some, the sheds were organized with precise military-like flair, whereas others were far less formal. It was daunting for some to think about the level of safety that is required to ensure people are not hurt or injured. This is an area where shed men in New Zealand will need to do some important work in the coming months and it was felt by those of us present that it would be good to get a national association developed in the lead up to the new year to address some of the consistent problems that sheds always face as they startup and develop new programmes. The matter of Shed safety and Insurance seem to loom as urgent matters to be addressed consistently on a national basis if possible.

For me, the health messages were good to hear and the challenge here is how to introduce more positive health practices and a greater awareness of how sudden negative health situations can arise without turning each shed into a health centre. The message of prevention and dealing with symptoms before it is too late came through. Consistently among the messages was the need for men (people) to stop smoking. It was the one recognized action to do to prolong life and maintain good health. Mixed in with that was an awareness of how good diet, regular sustained exercise, regular checkups with a medical practitioner could enable men to keep better health longterm.

Two major health initiatives were introduced to conference delegates – One was ***Beyond Blue*** : a national Australian depression initiative [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) which focuses on what is a major debilitating condition it is for many men. Depression can include anxiety disorders, bipolar disorders, post natal depression, relationship conflicts, situations applicable to different age and gender groups, as well as those who are affected by illness, death of loved ones, moving house or downsizing and so on. The website above is a great window for gaining more details relating to a particular condition and programmes that exist for support.

The second initiative is known as the ***M5 project of Men's Preventative Health***. This initiative arose from members of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners observing patterns of incidence that simply acknowledges family history plays a large part in determining a range of health conditions that are inherently genetic and can be prevented or minimised.

The M5 project <http://www.m5project.com.au/> acknowledges that men die earlier than women on average by 5 years and as a project it is a call to action which seeks to raise the profile of men's preventative health. The M5 Project focuses on the five main health risk factors of Age, Family History, Bowel Disease, Obesity, and Smoking while aiming to decrease the five preventable deaths each hour to zero; Heart Disease, Diabetes, Cancer, Mental illness and Other

Medical Conditions. Each delegate was given two pieces of advice – stop smoking ( if they hadn't already) and to fill out a *Sharing my Family History* document (given out as part of the delegation pack, designed to make explicitly clear what genetic predispositions there were for each member of each family. The project maintains that while we have fought in the past for beliefs, land, religion, peace equality and attention, “as men — fathers, sons, brothers, partners and friends — we have a new cause to fight for — our health”.

To conclude, in presenting a paper summarizing my research of Community Men's Sheds in Australia and the United Kingdom, I conveyed a notion that Community Sheds that have developed from within Australian communities were a most positive development for supporting men. While each shed establishment has unique community influences that can be traced through colonial influences and in particular the harsh environment and a larger population of Australia, similar influences and links are present in New Zealand and the uptake of such a community shed movement seems to be accelerating rapidly too. While Australian's are unsure of the exact number of sheds presently (above 300), having doubled every two years since the 1980s, they cannot continue to grow at that rate and rationalization is starting to occur. In New Zealand as we are smaller in size and population, initial growth will be similarly rapid but there is no room for competition – the resources we need to operate effectively are too scarce to squander on wasted energies. In Australia at least two local governments are involved in providing startup funding of between \$20 – 25,000 for each shed; Victoria State and Brisbane City. These areas recognize the importance for the community of having men physically and mentally well and in good spirit. They recognize all of the features of a community shed are positive – life-long learning through collective energies, community mindedness, recreative experiences, independence, personal and mental health benefits for families, and an enthusiasm that motivates and inspires others including the rapport shown by men in mentoring relationships with the young.

This conference reflected to me the rejuvenated energies of predominantly older men belonging to community men's sheds. I also acknowledged the dedication many women demonstrated when becoming involved with sheds and related agencies, particularly their support of men meeting and working together. While many women would also like to get involved with sheds themselves, initially men need to get things going and to sort a few things out for themselves at first – what ever that means - even muddling along. It is a cathartic journey and not just a destination for many older and lonely men where a lot of support is needed to get some men's feet in the door. I see down the track, many shed facilities will be used by both men and women, as some are already doing with night classes being held in a Shed. Arthur (Waiuku) is currently running a furniture restoration course at the West Franklin Shed and I saw Computer and Ukulele classes being run in the Freo Men's Shed in Fremantle.

To be done? Lets get a meeting of shed coordinators / managers organized possibly through a video conference of local education centres and once this has been created, some of the consistent concerns – Insurance, safety, projects, ideas, finance can be advanced for the benefit of all the local sheds being set up at the moment. Within the next fortnight we'll coordinate with as many sheds as possible a conference situation that can springboard us forward toward an Association of NZ Community Sheds.

Neil Bruce (Dr)

Chair Hamilton Community Men's Shed