

Early Identification and Intervention: Primary Health Care in the Nineties

Helen Hill, Roslyn Stevens

Sunbury Community Health Centre

Introduction

Sunbury Community Health Centre's Early Identification and Intervention Program is comprehensive. The Centre has a broad range of identification initiatives which assess for early physical changes in an individual's health, as well as recognising the social and emotional causes of ill health. The Centre has undertaken early identification activities for groups in the community at risk of health problems, has identified environmental hazards and, where possible, taken appropriate action. The Centre has made links with other community agencies which participate in and support the comprehensive Early Identification and Intervention Program.

The Sunbury Community Health Centre is committed to identifying the potential and early stage health problems of members of its community to enable early intervention and better management of these. The work practices of the Centre staff demonstrate this strong commitment, with each department being involved in at least one early identification and intervention program each year.

Staff also incorporate early identification and intervention issues and methods in their individual primary care caseload to assist with more effective outcome management. This encompasses virtually all life stages of groups in the community. Many of these programs are run in conjunction with other agencies.

Sunbury was the first community health centre in Victoria to receive national accreditation. In 1993, the Centre's 'One Stop Body Shop' health screening program (a major component of the Early Identification and Intervention Program) won the Health Promotion Award in the inaugural Awards for Innovation and Excellence in Community Health.

The unique flexibility of the Program is its ability to respond to the community's needs by providing times and locations which maximise access to the Program and related services.

Objectives

Sunbury is an outer metropolitan area of Melbourne, with a growth rate among the highest in Victoria, and with limited access to other health and welfare services. In recent years, budgetary restraints have necessitated an innovative approach to deal with the increasing demand for direct services. The Early Identification and Intervention Program ensures that staff members of the Centre, identify early signs of disorders and disease, thereby enabling more efficient and effective intervention methods to be undertaken. This facilitates early referral and minimises the problem of inappropriate referral for direct services.

The aims of the Program are to:

- provide a point of entry for the community to access appropriate Early Identification and Intervention services for a wide range of physical, emotional, social, and developmental health problems;
- encourage the participation of the community in the maintenance of individual and collective health to prevent the possibility of long term debilitating disease;
- ensure that staff maintain high levels of professional standards of practice with a strong commitment to ongoing professional development by using validated benchmarks;
- reach a larger percentage of the catchment area; and
- encourage staff to use creative and innovative methods and problem solving skills to provide high quality programs with a limited budget.

The overall aim of the Program is to reach all population groups from babies to the elderly.

Strategies

A wide range of strategies has been used as part of the Program, including:

- the use of community venues, such as pre-schools, primary and secondary schools, neighbourhood houses, kerb sides, and workplaces;
- the development of creative and innovative strategies to cater for the needs of people from a wide range of ages, and which recognise differences in gender, sex, and life stages;
- the involvement of volunteers in many of the activities;
- the provision of services out of hours (weekends and evenings), and use of a range of approaches, such as mass screening, group work and individual referrals; and
- the co-ordination of the Centre's programs with those of other community agencies.

The range of strategies employed in the Early Identification and Intervention Program allow a larger number of people to be seen than would be possible on a one-to-one basis alone. For example, paediatric early identification occurs mainly in the areas of speech pathology, audiology, and occupational therapy, and for speech pathology, pre-school sessions could involve as many as 70 new referrals in the space of two weeks. There is also a program which screens primary school children for sight and hearing problems.

Physical screening involves a corporate program known as 'Health at Work', where cardiovascular health assessments are available to people in local industry and local government.

The Centre's annual 'One Stop Body Shop' involves two days of adult screening of between 500 and 600 people for many illnesses or risk factors, such as skin, and cervical or testicular cancer, cholesterol level testing, lung function, blood pressure, and many more.

In the social/emotional field, 'Girls' Talk' is an adolescent early identification program which might identify girls at risk of depression, eating disorders, homelessness, dysfunctional families, sexual abuse, and personal and physical danger.

The 'Stop Dieting, Start Living' family program promotes increased awareness of potential family members 'at risk' of eating disorders. The program helps families to learn appropriate early intervention strategies.

A postnatal exercise group allows the early identification of parenting problems, of concerns about a baby's health, or of postnatal depression, where the subsequent provision of a support group, 'Mother to Mother', and therapy can prevent:

- medical intervention;
- medication regime;
- possible harm to the baby; and
- labelling.

There is an Older Women's Health Program, and an Over-50's Exercise Group, which are not only concerned with physical health, but also with emotional and social support.

The Centre has a family violence intervention program where a community health worker and member of the police attend together instances of family violence and violent behaviour. This combined early intervention leads to less legal intervention and less family disintegration. The Centre has developed a 'Say No to Violence' resource kit.

In conjunction with the Shire of Bulla, the Centre is part of the 'Safe Living Program' tackling child safety, traffic safety, seniors' safety and sports injury prevention. As part of an international program, the Shire of Bulla is the World Health Organization's 10th Safe Community.

Outcomes

The Early Identification and Intervention Program is an integral part of the Centre's overall community health program and as such does not have a budget of its own. The cost of this program has been offset by the savings in staff time previously used in the provision of 'one-to-one' traditional service delivery, and by the high level of community participation. The innovative nature of the strategies has allowed the momentum of the

Roslyn Stevens
Executive Officer
Sunbury Community Health Centre
Cnr. Gap Road and Horne Street
Sunbury, Victoria, 3429
AUSTRALIA

Centre's programs to be maintained, even with limited resources. It is the Centre's belief that this is the most cost effective way to manage the demands on community health services in the 1990s.

It has become increasingly evident that the community is keen to participate voluntarily in early identification activities. This has enabled access to groups in the community who have traditionally not used the Centre. For example, the 'One Stop Body Shop' has resulted in an increase in men attending the Centre.

The overall accessibility of programs has been popular in the community at large, heightening the awareness of the Centre's important role as a resource and first point of entry for health assessment. For example, speech pathology pre-school programs provide contact for many new families in the area and are often used as a referral source to other health services. The Early Identification and Intervention Program allows contact for a greater number of clients to be seen than could be seen on a 'one-to-one' basis.

The Early Identification and Intervention Program has a strong educative role for its own clients and for other health professionals and members of agencies working in conjunction with Centre staff. Individual clients, external professionals and other agencies in turn utilise the expertise of the Centre's staff as a resource and information base.

Editor's note

The 'Early Identification and Intervention Program' of Sunbury Community Health Centre won an award in the 1994 Awards for Innovation and Excellence in Primary Health Care (Early Identification and Intervention). It is published here by kind permission of the Centre for Development and Innovation in Health.