

Back to Bikes

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The 'Back to Bikes' health promotion initiative was planned and implemented by the Generalist Community Nurses working in the Health Centres of Wallerawang and Portland New South Wales.

Physical inactivity is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease in Australia, and has been identified as the most prevalent risk factor for heart disease in the United States. One strategy encouraged by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in Australia is that:

'State and local governments should investigate structural changes which will encourage people to walk or cycle instead of using motor transport wherever possible. Possibilities are car-free areas in cities (except for the disabled and elderly) and strategies to encourage cycling instead of driving' (DHHS, 1994).

Research from the NSW Health Promotion Survey 1994, indicates that past methods used to promote physical activity are not having the desired outcomes that are necessary to counter heart disease and there are still too many sedentary Australians. Forty nine per cent of people in NSW are not exercising enough for any significant benefit to their health.

With this in mind, we decided that a different approach to the promotion of physical activity was needed and so developed the 'Back to Bikes' program, which promotes the integration of bicycle use into daily lifestyle as a preferable means of transport over car use. This strategy for physical activity can provide the recommended regular and moderate exercise necessary to reduce the risk of cardiovascular

related diseases and maintain good health.

Aim

To encourage sustainable behavioural change in favour of bicycle use as a mode of transport; thereby providing the moderate regular physical activity necessary for long term benefits to health of the individual and the community.

Objectives

- To increase participants' confidence in all aspects of bicycle use - including safe cycling, basic bicycle maintenance, use of gears, and correct positioning on the bicycle;
- To encourage regular use of their bicycles for short journeys;
- To increase the participants' amount of regular physical activity: by choosing the bicycle for transport and recreation over the car whenever possible;
- To maintain a positive and enthusiastic approach about bicycle use as everyday transport;
- To inform participants at every opportunity about the many health benefits of including the bicycle as part of daily lifestyle e.g. reducing hypertension, an effective strategy for the management of type 11 diabetes and reduced likelihood of developing some forms of cancer.

Methodology

'Back to Bikes' (Thursday mornings) commenced in February of 1997 and was promoted as a slow and gentle way of rediscovering the joys of the bicycle. The first two rides were planned over a short distance (12kms) and on reasonably flat, quiet roads. Initially an eight week program was planned with consideration given to the vagaries of the

weather in the area, as we felt that inclement weather would not encourage the participants. But, to our surprise the weather has not been an obstacle to participation.

These initial rides were held in and around the town of Portland as most of the interest generated came from Portland. As the program gained recognition, interest came from Lithgow and regular rides commenced there as well on a Thursday morning.

To attract participants to the initial rides, we provided morning tea and gave away water bottles obtained from the Road Transport Authority. Bicycle maintenance was provided and proved to be an essential component of the program.

Publicity included posters, handouts, newspaper articles and community service announcements on the local radio.

Evaluation of the program to date

This enthusiasm from the riders has resulted in the program continuing as a long term project, and it is anticipated that in February of 1998 we will re-evaluate 'Back to Bikes'.

Each Thursday the Lithgow group meets and bicycles a loop of 16kms around the town. The number of cyclists on these rides varies from two on cold days to nine in the warmer weather and the age of the participants is from around 45 to 68 (men and women). The interest continues for 'Back to Bikes' and some of the participants are choosing to cycle in preference to driving for activities such as visiting friends and shopping. Also, the impetus from 'Back to Bikes' has prompted other participants to increase their amount of recreational cycling

and we have had verbal positive comments in regard to improved health e.g. increased mobility in arthritic joints.

The difficulties faced by participants are mostly related to contending with the negative attitude arising from a community that is not supportive of bicycle use. This has come from a number of quarters. Health professionals reluctant to promote cycling, family members who consider cycling dangerous and lastly the media. To counter this, it is essential that we impart the message to participants that cycling is beneficial to their health and encourage them to cycle often.

In order to enable a positive community attitude toward bicycle use we:

- i. regularly submit articles to the local paper on the benefits of bicycle use to health;
- ii. inform all clients about the benefits of cycle use as transport;
- iii. use the bicycle within our work when ever possible;
- iv. use the bicycle out of hours, for such things as commuting and shopping;
- v. encourage clients to choose the bicycle;
- vi. provide bicycle maintenance days at the local schools and pre-school; and
- vii. plan to provide more information about the health benefits of bicycle use to GPs and Allied Health staff.

Promoting an attitude change that is favourable to bicycle use for transport is a long term project and is an area of health promotion that does not produce huge results in the short term. But the potential benefits to the health of the individual and the community are so great, that this simple idea of using the bicycle instead of driving cannot be ignored as a strategy for moderate, regular physical activity.

References

Department of Health and Human Services (1994). *Better Health Outcomes for Australians*. Author: Canberra.

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