

Promoting positive mental health in rural WA

by Ray James and Rob Donovan

THE CENTRE FOR BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH in Cancer Control, Curtin University is collaborating with six rural towns to improve mental health of the whole community.

One in four women and one in six men in Australia will experience depression at some time in their life.

Fortunately, depression is treatable. Anti-depressant medication or psychotherapy can improve depression. However, many Australians would prefer lifestyle interventions that prevent or alleviate mental health problems. Until recently, there has not been much evidence to support the effectiveness of prevention and promoting resilience has not had much emphasis in mental illness services.

Now the Mentally Healthy WA campaign is testing a population-based approach to improving the mental health and well-being of six rural communities.

The Mentally Healthy WA campaign is based on the relatively simple concept of: Act-Belong-Commit.

Being active - physically, mentally and socially is one of the best ways to deal with stress and to build personal resilience. Regular physical activity, time spent in hobbies or crafts, or time just spent with friends and family gives people a sense of well-being that helps prevent or reduce depression.

Research indicates that our circle of close friends has shrunk significantly over the last two decades. Australians are also less likely to join clubs, unions or churches now. Lack of social connectedness can adversely affect the body and the



Karratha Youth Theatre perform for A-B-C launch

mind, so 'belonging' can help establish a sense of place and well-being. Truly: 'friends are good medicine'.

Studies also indicate that helping others increases our physical and our mental health. There seems to be a direct link between making a 'commitment' to helping others and our own levels of happiness or life satisfaction. Volunteering has a positive effect, irrespective of social status, education or wealth.

Act-Belong-Commit: Be active, increase your participation in clubs and groups, and make a commitment to help others as a coach or mentor. This is the way to improve your own mental health and the health of your community.

For more information on the Mentally Healthy WA campaign: www.mentallyhealthywa.org.au or contact Dr Ray James on ray.james@curtin.edu.au ❖

More PARTYline stories on-line at www.ruralhealth.org.au

We have worked closely with *beyondblue: the national depression initiative* to produce PARTYline #25 with a thematic focus on recovery from depression. We anticipated that PARTYline's 'standard' fare would be supplemented by about 10 or 12 thematic stories. We were in for a big surprise! We emailed our readers to submit stories on the theme – and were overwhelmed. We received stories from service providers, resource providers, health promoters, as well as from readers who have recovered from depression. It very quickly became clear that the joint *NRHA/beyondblue* edition would need to be devoted completely to thematic stories. We decided

also to publish PARTYline #26 simultaneously to accommodate some of our standard stories and the overflow of readers' thematic ones. As well as that, from the balance of thematic stories still outstanding we have selected another set to be published in our on-line supplement, PART-e-line which can be accessed at www.ruralhealth.org.au. Thank you to all our contributors. We wish we could have included everything we received. This exercise has demonstrated that mental health is a major issue in rural areas and we hope that these special issues of PARTYline will make a useful and positive contribution. Ed.