



*18<sup>th</sup> November, 2009*

*The Committee Secretary  
Senate Community Affairs References Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600*

### ***INQUIRY INTO SUICIDE IN AUSTRALIA***

*We attach a submission to the Inquiry which has been prepared by the Australian Mens Sheds Association (AMSA) to demonstrate and explain the positive role that Mens Sheds play in preventing suicide among a high-risk group of Australians: the mature age unemployed and often socially isolated men who form a high proportion of our members.*

*Although AMSA is relatively new, it has quickly become the leading representative of the Mens Shed Movement in Australia and now represents over 350 Mens Sheds across the country.*

*The Mens Shed Movement is an Australian social phenomenon with the first Sheds dating back some 15 years. During this time the many Sheds comprising the Movement have accumulated a great deal of knowledge about men's health and well-being from practical observation and from the information and guidance provided by the many individual health professionals who have taken an interest in and supported individual Sheds and the Movement.*

*AMSA is fortunate in having been able to draw upon the research, guidance and enthusiastic support of Professor John Macdonald, Foundation Chair of Primary Health Care, University of Western Sydney and President, Australian Mens Health Forum; A/Professor Barry Golding, School of Education, University of Ballarat and A/Prof Gary Misan, Spencer Gulf Rural Health School.*



*AMSA is pleased to also have links with the growing number of community-based Suicide Prevention Networks around NSW who recognise that establishing or supporting a local Mens Shed is a primary suicide prevention measure.*

*We commend our submission to the Inquiry and will be most pleased to attend and elaborate upon our statements or to answer any questions that the Committee may have.*

*Yours faithfully*

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*Mort Shearer  
National President*



## Key Points

- The Australian Mens Sheds Association believes that Mens Sheds have a very real and positive role to play in suicide prevention and that they are already playing that role.
- Males account for around 80% of deaths by suicide. Men with a number of suicide risk factors including social isolation, lack of a sense of purpose and poor self-esteem are acknowledged to be a high-risk group.
- Mens Sheds offer to this same high-risk group a safe, men-friendly environment in which they can work on projects which give them a sense of purpose, which contribute to self-esteem and which help men to resume their rightful place as useful and productive members of their community. These activities provide valuable suicide protective factors.
- Mens Shed activities happen in the company of other men where the men build social and support networks generating additional protective factors.
- Mens Sheds provide an environment which encourages the men to learn about their own health and well-being in a way which has proven to be acceptable to this high-risk group who will not generally seek support or information from traditional health providers.
- Mens Sheds build capacity and resilience in this high risk-group of men and are seen as providing a number of powerful suicide protective factors.

## Scope of this Submission

The issues surrounding suicide generally are many and complex and we are aware that they are being adequately explored and explained in a number of other submissions to the Inquiry. In particular, we support the joint submission "Suicide Is Preventable" by Suicide Prevention Australia and others.

This submission by the Australian Mens Sheds Association (AMSA) will therefore concentrate on those aspects of suicide prevention where Mens Sheds have an important and useful part to play. In particular we address clause f) of the Terms of Reference –

‘the role of targeted programs and services that address the particular circumstances of high-risk groups’

The information in this submission draws primarily upon the wide range of practical experience and the observations of their members gained from the large number of Mens Sheds who are members of AMSA. Much of this



experience is regularly exchanged between individuals and between Sheds at local cluster meetings and at the various State and National Conferences.

In addition we have drawn upon the work of A/Prof Barry Golding and his team from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research at the University of Ballarat who produced the 2007 report "Mens Sheds in Australia: Learning through Community Contexts". Appendix A quotes a number of passages from that report that support the information and concepts contained in the text of the submission.

We are grateful for the guidance, advice and enthusiastic support given to AMSA and to the Mens Shed Movement in Australia by Professor John Macdonald, Foundation Chair in Primary Health Care and Co-Director Men's Health Information and Resource Centre at the University of Western Sydney and President of the Australasian Men's Health Forum

Appendix B contains several (de-identified) stories drawn from members of Mens Sheds that illustrate some of the points made in the submission.

## **About AMSA**

The formation of the Australian Mens Sheds Association is a story of determination and dedication by a group of unfunded and mostly unpaid volunteers from around Australia.

In 2005 a National Conference of Mens Sheds was held in Victoria at which the concept of a national organisation was born. By 2007 the concept had advanced further and representatives of around 160 Sheds met at Manly, NSW and resolved to form the Australian Mens Sheds Association. At the 2009 National Conference in Hobart a National Board of Directors was elected, representing more than 350 Mens Sheds across Australia which had registered with AMSA.

AMSA's objects as set out in our Constitution are:

To advance the health and well-being of all men in Australia by

- (a) promoting, advancing, and supporting an effective and sustainable Men's Shed Movement
- (b) representing the interests of men, their Sheds and the Movement to all stakeholders including men, their Sheds, their communities, business, the health profession and all levels of government.
- (c) the holding of regular Conferences including teleconferences and
- (d) the regular dissemination of information to all stakeholders including electronic communications.

Our experience is that the pace of formation of new Mens Sheds is accelerating and we believe that the role of AMSA will be critical to the orderly



development of the Movement. Currently AMSA is poorly funded, in common with many Sheds, but applications are now before the Federal Government seeking funding to permit AMSA to properly and effectively carry out its objectives and to be an effective advocate and support base for the Movement.

The Mens Shed concept originated in Australia and is now gaining ground overseas. AMSA is currently working with groups establishing Mens Sheds in New Zealand, Ireland and the USA.

AMSA has a very clear policy that we do not dictate how individual Sheds operate. Management of each Shed is entirely in the hands of their own local Committee of Management, local Cluster of Sheds and the various affiliated State Associations. AMSA sees its role as a support organisation, a hub for exchange and dissemination of information and as representative of the Mens Shed Movement as a whole. AMSA will, however, make strong recommendations to its members about matters of safety and matters affecting the Movement as a whole.

### **About Mens Sheds**

There is really nothing new about the concept underlying a Mens Shed. Men have been gathering together in the company of other men for a very long time. Organised groups like the Freemasons, Rotary and many private clubs have long histories of being exclusively male preserves. Informal men-only gatherings of mates to play sport, play cards or to work together on a project in a backyard shed have also long been a normal part of mens life.

These organisations have all been performing similar social tasks to the modern Mens Shed – men working together for a common purpose and forming social connections in the company of other men. As Rotary so succinctly puts it: “Fellowship through service”

Modern social pressures are removing the male exclusivity from many of these organised groups and downsizing to apartments and townhouses is removing the backyard shed from the informal groups.

The community Mens Shed is taking the place of these organisations for men who regret the loss and is providing them with a safe place where they can rediscover their masculinity in a positive and non-aggressive way.

A useful working definition of a Mens Shed was developed by A/Prof Barry Golding in 2007 as *“...typically located in a shed or workshop-type space in a community setting and become a focus for regular and systematic, hands-on activity by groups deliberately and mainly comprising men.”*

The first Mens Sheds started to appear around 15 years ago in Australia, often started by community groups, health promotion organisations, aged-care



facilities or churches. They have been essentially grass-roots enterprises, each with a strong local community focus, which partly explains their lack of formal recognition in government circles until recent times. This has led to Sheds being neither properly recognised and integrated with the public health system nor properly funded in their own right.

While women typically do not take part in workshop activities, our experience is that women are usually among the strongest supporters of Sheds either as part of the management team or as enthusiastic promoters of Sheds. Many Sheds report that the majority of their recruits come to them as a result of prompting by a wife, a mother, a daughter or a sister.

It is notable how few women object to the provision of workshop activities exclusively for men.

Sheds vary greatly from one to another, each developed according to the needs of the community or group which formed them. They do, however, share a common focus: the health and well-being of their members. This diversity of activities, membership and structure between Sheds is one of the Mens Sheds Movement's strongest features in that there is a wide range of knowledge and experience freely available to new Sheds on many different ways of achieving the common purpose.

Funding of Sheds often comes from a mix of State Government, Federal Government and community sources supplemented by income generated by the Sheds themselves from their operations. Most funding tends to be for project expenditure with little funding available for recurrent expenditure.

An important characteristic of successful Sheds is that they respect the sensitivity of men to a range of issues including:

- 'A boss-free zone' – many shedders are attracted by the freedom from authority and from enforced routine that is an intrinsic part of a Mens Shed. Sheds that attempt to run as fully self-funded quasi-commercial operations place quality control, attendance and performance pressures on the men that negate the healing properties inherent in the Mens Shed model that AMSA promotes.
- 'Nothin' wrong with me, mate' – insensitive promotion of health messages can prevent men joining Sheds. Many men see themselves as able to cope with whatever health issues they may have and they are particularly wary of issues carrying social stigma such as mental illness and suicide. The successful Sheds are very subtle and creative in the way they introduce such matters and are consequently successful in passing on valuable messages in a way that the men find acceptable.

An important perspective to Mens Sheds is that they are not, nor do they have the resources or training to be what used to be called 'sheltered workshops'.



If the only clients were to be damaged and unwell men a Shed would be a sombre, unattractive and possibly unhealthy place. The best Sheds incorporate a healthy mix of different ages, different skills and skill levels, men who can teach and men who want to learn, men who need support, men who are both able and willing to give support and men who just want to find something useful to do with their time and skills.

Another perspective on Sheds is that they must not appear to the Shedders to be overly formal and organised. The 'boss-free' zone concept is an essential part of presenting a stress-free environment. Part of the skill in successfully managing a Shed is in determining the Shedders' preferences as to their involvement in organising the Shed; their tolerance for new health and well-being information and how it is presented; the proportion of community work to be undertaken and a range of other management issues. Shed leadership must balance these matters with strict observance of safety measures including OH&S, Child Protection, risk management, dispute resolution and respect for other Shedders.

In summary, Mens Sheds are community-based facilities that offer men a safe, friendly and healing environment in which they can rediscover their usefulness to their community and their self-esteem in company with other men.

### **Men at Risk**

The range of men attending the Sheds – we refer to them as the Shedders – are of all ages and cover a range of demographics.

The high-risk group that Mens Sheds serve and who are relevant to this submission may be broadly characterized as consisting of mature-age men who have at least several high suicide risk factors usually including unemployment, poor self-esteem and/or isolation - either geographical or social. Undiagnosed mild to moderate depression is also often present. Men meeting this description comprise a large proportion of Shedders.

Unemployment, in particular, has a number of negative consequences for the older men who attend Sheds. The reasons for their unemployment will include early retirement, redundancy, loss of business/loss of farm as well as having reached normal retirement age. It is probably fair to say that the reasons for their unemployment are often less important than the fact that they are unemployed and they therefore have an excess of time and no useful and interesting activities to fill that time. The result is often boredom and a feeling of being useless which can readily lead to depression.

Many men, particularly older men, often think of themselves as what they are as much as who they are. When mature men meet the essence of one of the first questions is usually 'What do you do?' rather than 'Who are you?' Thus





loss of job can entail some loss of identity and some loss of self-esteem, more so if the loss of job was not by their choice.

Because older men tend to remain in a job for long periods of time, they also tend to base their social life around their workplace. Their workmates become their social network and a part of their personal support network. Loss of job, for whatever reason, often involves some loss of social/support networks and leads to a sense of isolation.

The isolation is often compounded by other factors including

- A retirement sea-change or tree-change meaning a move away from established social and support networks
- Downsizing the family home and loss of the backyard shed with the loss of the place where blokes used to meet
- The death or disability of a partner
- The onset of physical disability or dementia

Isolation readily breeds feelings of hopelessness, substance abuse and depression, all major suicide risk factors.

There are many other risk factors that a proportion of men exhibit when they first come to a Shed including:

- Anxiety
- Mild disability
- Chronic pain or illness
- Poor coping skills
- Poor communication skills
- Aggression
- Dysfunctional families
- Lack of support services

Men at risk are only one part of the problem. A dysfunctional man often causes flow-on effects to other community members including

- Disruption to family members (if any)
- Disruption to friends (if any)
- Loss of productivity
- Drain on the health system and social service system

In summary, by improving men's health and well-being, Mens Sheds offer valuable early prevention measures. These early prevention measures establish protective factors which build capacity and resilience in the men before the problems become critical.





## What Do Mens Sheds Provide?

Based on the picture of a Mens Shed painted above, we list below a summary of some of the more important resources that Sheds provide which can build real protective factors in their Shedders:

- A stress-free environment – all Sheds operating under the model promoted by AMSA concentrate on reducing stress and providing that 'boss-free zone' that encourages a sense of a man being free to work on a project of his own choice at his own pace in his own time.
- Protection from harm – AMSA strongly encourages Sheds to put in place quite formal programs covering Occupational Health and Safety best practice, risk assessment procedures, Child Protection measures and a strong ethic of respect for fellow Shedders.
- Transparency – the encouragement of social inclusion, transparent management policies and fair and even treatment of all stakeholders discourages the development of factions and cliques
- Mateship – building social connections and reducing isolation. The importance of this is protective factor is pointed out clearly in the Federal Government's 2008 suicide prevention publication 'Living is For Everyone' (LIFE Framework) which states that "The key social support systems that assist in building individual resilience and capacity to respond positively to adverse life events are: support of family and friends; positive and supportive relationships; social connectedness...
- Sharing - it is said the men don't talk face to face, they talk shoulder to shoulder. The building of social connections in the productive, friendly and stress-free environment of a Mens Shed promotes the building of confidence and trust which, in turn, promotes the healthy and supportive process of sharing.
- Rediscovering masculinity - to quote A/Prof Barry Golding: "In essence, sheds provide a licence for men to tap into and safely experience the essence of being 'blokes', separate from, but without being oppressive to, women and girls".
- A bloke's haven – the purposeful but friendly atmosphere, the smell of wood, the touch of tools, the comfortable feel of work clothes, the lack of unnecessary decorations all make for an environment that puts men at ease.
- The 'blokes haven' can be particularly valuable to men who live in aged care facilities where women make up the majority of residents because they live longer and the facility naturally aims to please this female majority.
- Structure – attendance at a Shed, meeting mates regularly and working on projects is for many shedders an event to look forward to each day or each week, an event that builds anticipation and breeds hope.
- A sense of purpose – a reason to not only get out of bed, but to get out of the house and to go and do something useful for self, family or



community. This also quickly translates into that most positive of emotions – hope

- Entertainment – every Shed has a lunch/tea/coffee/relaxing area where men can just sit, chat, read, learn something or spin tall yarns. An important part of the Shed ambience.
- Generosity – men in Sheds repeatedly demonstrate their generosity of spirit. If someone needs something that the men can fix or make that will improve their life, the men will readily do it. Generosity is a powerful ‘feel-good’ factor
- A place in the community – to fix something or to make something useful, needed or just decorative is to once again become a provider
- New skills – as well as workshop skills, more and more Sheds are providing learning opportunities in computing, cooking, nutrition, yoga and a range of other skills. To learn new skills is to become more capable and self confident. To pass on one’s skills to someone new is to become a teacher. Both produce positive emotions.
- Computing skills in particular open up an easy form of communication with distant family and friends which helps to reduce isolation.
- Mentoring – many younger men lack positive role models in their lives, so many Sheds have established mentoring programs for youth. Working in a safe environment alongside older men in a properly constructed and supervised program can be very beneficial for both the mentor and the mentee.
- Food and nutrition – more and more Sheds are installing some form of catering facility – from a simple BBQ to a proper kitchen where men who live alone and who do not bother to cook can get at least occasional real nourishment and perhaps learn how to cook easy nutritious meals for themselves
- Health information – when provided in a manner which is acceptable to the men, a Shed can provide useful and sometimes life-saving information on health and well-being. In addition, more and more Sheds are providing referrals to services, visits and talks by health promotion agencies and even on-the-spot check-ups on an organised basis.
- Substance abuse – Mens Sheds actively discourage substance abuse. We are unaware of any Sheds where alcohol is consumed on the premises.
- Exchange of information – an important part of belonging to a Shed is learning to exchange information with other Sheddors. Not all health and well-being information comes from outside. The life experiences of many of the Sheddors can be a useful source of knowledge and guidance about lifeskills.
- Mental health programs - A growing number of individual Sheds are working with health providers, both government and non-government, to provide therapeutic programs to men suffering from mental illness - a major suicide risk factor. Those programs that involve clinical therapy



are often arranged to be on days when the regular Shedders are not present so that the program can more closely focus on the target audience and so that it does not detract from the normal operation of the Shed.

- Respite care – in the case of men with mild dementia, physical or mental disabilities, Mens Sheds often provide a valuable form of respite care to their families or carers during the time that the men attend their Shed. Men with more serious disabilities are usually asked to come with a carer so as to avoid the situation where the Shed supervisor's time is so taken up with special needs members that he cannot properly supervise and safeguard the rest of the Shedders present.

In short, a successful Mens Shed provides a variety of resources that make up a safe and healing environment where men can relax, work on their choice of projects at their own pace and learn about themselves and their own well-being in harmonious company with other men. All of these resources contribute directly or indirectly to building resilience and capacity in the men.

### **Why Do Mens Sheds Need To Be Regarded As An Important Part Of The Suicide Prevention Process?**

The short-form answer is because they exhibit qualities that make them an effective, low-cost way of building resilience and capacity in a high-risk group who are very hard to reach by other means.

A major part of the effectiveness of Mens Sheds is that the high-risk section of the group that they serve – older, unemployed, isolated males with a range of suicide risk factors and who will not readily access traditional health information or support - have demonstrated repeatedly that they find that same information acceptable when delivered in the context of a Mens Shed.

There is strong narrative evidence that Mens Sheds take a significant part of the load of supporting individual men away from community health and social service systems and that they provide that support with little government funding when related to the number of men that they serve.

Mens Sheds also take part of the load away from community social service systems by making real and valuable contributions to community projects. Every operating Shed that we are aware of supports local charitable organisations, local institutions, local government and individuals in one way or another by their community work. Mens Sheds therefore provide resources that often simply would not otherwise be affordable or obtainable. Efforts are made to achieve this in a way that does not damage local business.

A further feature of Mens Sheds is the degree of support and acceptance demonstrated by their local communities. The grass-roots nature of the Mens Shed Movement has come about because most Sheds have been either



established or are being at least partly funded by a surge of community support. It is notable that women have often been prominent in marshalling this community support.

Community support and a sense of community ownership is important to the image of a Shed. If a Shed is seen to be 'owned' by a particular group – such as a church, a Council, a health provider – the community often shows reluctance to be as supportive and membership tends to be not as representative of the whole community. In general, the more the Sheddors feel ownership of their Shed, the more successful the Shed.

Under the previous Federal Government's National Suicide Prevention Strategy a number of Community-based Suicide Prevention Networks were established in NSW. The role of Mens Sheds in suicide prevention was recognised in this program and a strong recommendation to each Network was to establish a local Mens Shed, or if one already existed, to support that Shed as a positive strategy for suicide risk reduction.

In summary, Mens Sheds are able to effectively build qualities in their members which act as suicide protective factors at a minimal cost to the community while providing community resources and providing opportunities for communities to come together in support of their Sheds.

## **Conclusion**

The Mens Shed Movement is fast becoming a simple, effective and powerful force for mens health and well-being in modern Australian society. It provides both effective and cost-effective support to a high-risk group in addition to helping to build a sense of community. The Movement is therefore a contributor to suicide prevention among both the target high-risk group who attend Sheds and the broader community.

A growing number of individual Sheds are working with health providers, both government and non-government, to provide support and rehabilitation programs to men suffering from mental illness and are therefore working to reduce mental illness as a suicide risk factor.

Alliances are being formed between AMSA and a range of organisations who want to support AMSA's efforts in advancing mens health and well-being including beyond blue and the Royal Australian College of GPs. Other alliances will be announced shortly.

The Mens Shed model promoted by AMSA does not rely on Government funding for its viability, however it is clear that an appropriate injection of funding would greatly enhance the ability of the Mens Shed Movement to develop its potential as a powerful force for mens health and well-being and therefore as an effective suicide prevention tool.



AMSA, as the primary representative of the Mens Shed Movement, is currently seeking funding so as to be able to

- carry out programs of research and evaluation to develop the range and quality of in-Shed programs
- clearly demonstrate through research the value of Mens Sheds to the men themselves, their families and friends and their communities and to use that research to recruit men who have not yet benefited from the experience of Shed membership
- develop training programs to advance the quality of care and management in Sheds
- further develop existing policies and guidelines and to disseminate information on matters of importance including risk management, OH&S and Child Protection issues
- establish an internet knowledge base which will freely share the accumulated knowledge gained from the broad range of experience of our members
- arrange and provide affordable policies of insurance to Sheds
- establish additional strategic alliances with other organisations who have similar aims
- quantify and demonstrate the cost savings to government health and social services

The Federal Government's 2008 suicide prevention publication "Living is For Everyone" promotes the concept that suicide risk is reduced in people who are healthy, happy and have good social connections. Mens Sheds positively provide the opportunity for men in a high-risk group to be happy, healthy and socially well connected.

A comment heard often around Mens Sheds in one form or another is "The Shed saved my life". There are 2 very significant aspects to this comment:

1. a man made it and
2. he shared it with another man

Few other exchanges so clearly and concisely demonstrate what Mens Sheds are really about – enabling men to have a clear view and an understanding of themselves and their own health and well-being and to have enough connection with a mate to share that view.



## **APPENDIX A**

### ***RELEVANT QUOTES FROM "MENS SHEDS IN AUSTRALIA", Golding and Others, NCVET, University of Ballarat, 2007***

#### ***About men***

When men are happy, the community is happy

Men participate not primarily because they have lost access to tools, a shed or a work space— though one in ten have lost such access in the last five years—but because of social reasons, a desire to informally learn hobby and leisure skills with other men and to learn to stay fit and healthy. They are overwhelmingly keen to learn more, to improve their skills and become actively involved in the men's shed and the communities to which many of the sheds are already strongly attached.

#### ***About Mens Sheds***

Focus on the men, not the activity

There is evidence from our research that men's sheds give licence for older men to come together and positively experience and reconstruct their masculinity, 'without the negative repercussions of traditional patterns of aggressive behaviour' (Pease 2002, p.173).

In essence, sheds provide a licence for men to tap into and safely experience the essence of being 'blokes', separate from, but without being oppressive to, women and girls. In the process they are able to build on and share their existing hands-on skills. What they produce has considerable practical and economic value to the community. The benefits are significant for partners, families and carers as well as to the health and wellbeing of men who participate.

We identify a particular opportunity, so far developed in only a small number of sheds in each of the states examined, for sheds to set up very successful mentoring programs for school age students with an aversion to formal school settings but a keen desire to learn informally through shed-based practice.





In summary, men's sheds embrace, engage and actively involve a wide range of older men, many of whom are former tradesmen with a lifetime of skills and experience to share with younger men and in some cases children.

Shed therapy is missing in aged care – no clutter, dust, disorder, rust grease etc

### ***Demographics***

Vietnam Veterans, who comprise one in five participants in the shed sample for the current study, are known to be particularly prone to ongoing physical as well as psychological health issues (Nelson n.d., p.2) that can include 'depression, flash backs, hyperalertness, sleep disturbances, guilt'.

Nearly half of the men involved in men's sheds in Australia are over 65 years of age and around three out of ten have special needs (an impairment or disability).

Around three-quarters of men are retired from the paid workforce and a similar proportion receive some type of pension.

Two thirds of the men who use men's sheds had very limited formal school education—that is, not extending beyond Year 10.

Seven out of ten men did not enjoy learning at school.

One-third of men have an apprenticeship or traineeship as their highest formal education post-school: 15% have none.

Three out of ten men were referred to the men's shed through a health worker.

Six out of ten men still live with a wife or partner. Eight out of ten are fathers and more than one-half are grandfathers. Men are particularly enthused by the opportunity to give back to, and feel more accepted by, the community by sharing and mentoring as well as through the products and services they contribute to the community.

### ***Unemployment***

Australia is facing a situation of chronic under-employment and long-term unemployment among older men.

Changes in men's relationships, particularly marital separation as well as in work status (including unemployment and retirement), are known from





research (Relationships Australia 2003) to have significant and adverse effects on men's stress, health and wellbeing.

Nelson cites literature that suggests that 'even persons who had enjoyable leisure activities and had developed satisfying routines were prone to some form of letdown or depression at the end of their paid working lives', and 'pose significant risk of depression and potential suicide' (p.2).

## ***CONCLUSION***

This research confirms the high potential of men's sheds, if carefully customised and managed to fit the profile of men who participate, to include and support men experiencing issues associated with physical and psychological health issues, difficulties expressing needs, positive self-image, retirement, mental illness, disability, social isolation, ageing and significant change. What men's sheds provide is connection to other men in a safe, mutually supportive and inclusive environment where learning and health are fostered informally, without subverting the main reason for men coming to the shed. Men's sheds essentially have to do with men's happiness, connection to community, and social and emotional wellbeing. A shed environment creates a familiar space in which most men feel valued and at home, particularly but not necessarily with other men.



## ***APPENDIX B***

### ***A FEW STORIES FROM SHED LIFE***

#### **The Shed. A Life Saver**

At every shed conference I have attended there has been at least one man who gets up and shares his story, which is similar to the one that follows.

During the 1st National Men's Shed Conference held at Lakes Entrance, Victoria, in November 2005, a shed participant stood up and shared his story with the audience. He stated that his wife knew that, due to the progression of the cancer within her, her time on this earth was very limited. She knew her husband wouldn't cope with the losing her and asked her GP to keep an eye on him.

Some weeks after her death, the GP made a home visit to her husband, who hadn't been out of bed much since her death, he couldn't see the point. The GP prescribed some antidepressants that he commenced to take. This improved his state slightly, he was now motivated to get out of bed, but then just sat all day in the lounge room looking at the four walls around him, and occasionally looking at the bottle of tablets and considering ending it all.

When the GP next visited him, this was revealed, and the GP suggested giving the local Men's Shed a try. With nothing to lose he went along not knowing what to expect. He was welcomed openly and joined in the banter with the other men in attendance.

At the conference, this man said that if it wasn't for the Men's Shed, he wouldn't be alive now. What's more, the only time he is depressed now is on the weekends, when the shed is shut.

He added that he thought this depression stuff was for wimps, until he suffered from it himself. It is real and can be treated pharmacologically and in conjunction with psychosocial interventions.

#### **My SHED is important to me because.....**

I am a retrenched senior who is now 63 years old. I have been coming to our SHED in the southern suburbs of Adelaide since I was laid off from the Motor Industry in 2000. I have found the SHED, and my involvement with like-minded Volunteers to be essential to my well-being. It puts routine into my week, and ensures that I get out of bed to attend 2 days a week. I enjoy my continuing relationship with people of my own age, and when I am home, I have interesting things to talk about with my wife and family.

I see this as vital, and believe my health would suffer in the long term if this type of activity was not available to me. Our SHED is also assisting our local community in a number of important ways.

Regards Harry



### **Back Yard Sheds vs. Community Men's Sheds**

During 2006, Associate Professor Barry Golding headed up ground-breaking, world-first research, along with his research team based at Ballarat University and a reference committee of experts in the field, looking at whether community men's sheds were beneficial, and if so, in what ways. This involved 100 extensive questionnaires and visits to 24 community men's sheds, in five states across Australia.

I met with him in July 2006, at the completion of the research. He shared the key findings of the research with me (which are due to be published soon) and

commented that he had made another discovery. He found that community men's sheds were different in a number of ways to men's backyard sheds.

- Backyard sheds can be seen in a negative light, as some men escape their responsibly in the household by going to the shed. Men in community sheds take up responsibility for their mates and the community as they meet week after week, and these sheds are seen as something that is definitely positive.
- Some men in backyard sheds can be seen as self-centred, involved in hobbies, building or doing something for themselves. Men in community sheds, when they do work, often work on projects to benefit and aid others, not necessarily for themselves. Community focused projects can be anything from mending toys for the local child care centre, building a skate park ramp for the youth of the area, to making aids for the elderly citizens' club.
- Other men go to their backyard shed to be by themselves. Men in community sheds come to meet with other men.
- The backyard shed can be seen as a 'masculine place' where products are made with machinery and tools of varying complexity. Men in community sheds also make things, but the focus is not on this but on the mateship that occurs. The community shed can be a rare place where men will drop their guard and share intimate concerns such as health worries, family problems, his feelings, etc, with other men. Many men find the shed a safe environment in which to do this, and reap great benefits when others connect him to broader and specific community health agencies, while sharing the benefits they have enjoyed through such agencies.

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### **That's it!**

The wife of one of the men who had dementia and attended the community shed for respite once a week became upset and angry over something she perceived occurred at the shed. 'That was it, he wouldn't be going any more'. After numerous meetings with counselling staff, she was insistent in her decision and extremely angry.

However, three weeks later she rang the counsellor to ask if he could once again attend the shed. He was missing his mates, the work and most of all, the fun that he had in the community shed, so much so that every day he would be waiting on the front veranda to be picked up. His wife swallowed her pride and saw things in perspective, and he is now attending the shed, as previously.



## **We Want In**

One of the men with dementia who has been a participant in a community shed for men with dementia was admitted to a residential aged care facility to give his wife two weeks of respite.

While in respite, the shed was a highlight in his conversations with other men, so much so that when the shed coordinator came to pick him up from the facility to attend the shed for the day, two men without dementia asked "how can we get in?"

Activities that are meaningful in environments that people are used to is so important. For these two men, the shed would have provided a much needed break from the routines, monotony and boredom found in some residential aged care facilities. This is an area we have been slow to address for men, despite the volumes of literature on this by authors such as Earl, Earl and Von Mering; M. Thomson; K. Bettany and, more recently, B. Golding et al.

✧ In summary, research shows that community based men's sheds are providing critically important informal learning opportunities programs and spaces for men, particularly for older men facing issues associated with change including aging, health, retirement, isolation, unemployment, disability and separation. Golding et al

## **Gus**

Within a month of the Shed's opening a contact with the Regional Mental Health Unit resulted in a visit from a counselor who introduced us to Gus. We were informed that he was a 'non-communicant'. During that first visit he contributed not a word to any conversation. We wondered if we would ever see him again but the following week he arrived by himself, spent the day with us and joined in the full activities of the Shed. I telephoned the counselor that evening to ask if he had sent the same person because the Gus of that day wouldn't stop talking. He had talked freely and volubly with anyone who would listen about his past and the day's news. It was a day of almost continuous talk. The counselor's analysis, "You've simply taken the cork out of the bottle".

Gus is still with us, a regular attendee, one of our most enthusiastic members, attending almost every public function organized by the Shed since we opened and volunteering for our 'Kids in the Shed' program during the school vacations. Have we solved his personal and mental health problems? No, but we believe his life has a new purpose. Gus is our expert with the broom and vacuum cleaner and is so diligent with this task that often it's difficult to find the components of your current projects as they are constantly being rearranged by Gus to maintain you bench free of dust and shavings. As an active member of the RSL he has promoted with veterans the benefit of attending a Men's Shed as part of a healing process.

Gus has recently been diagnosed as 'bipolar' and has kept us informed of his treatment. His family is most appreciative of his attendance at the Shed, as are we!