

Working in Partnership - Healthy Cities Illawarra and the Illawarra Safe Communities Program

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Introduction

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO)'s Health For All strategy (1981), "All human beings have an equal right to health and safety."

Emanating from this principle are two major WHO programs: the Global Program for Injury Reduction which promotes the "Safe Communities" model, summarised in the WHO Manifesto for Safe Communities (1989), and the WHO Healthy Cities concept, closely linked to the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (1986).

Although, philosophically and strategically, the Safe Communities concept shares much in common with the Healthy Cities approach, few Healthy Cities programs worldwide have specifically identified injury prevention as a major component of their activities. Moreover, only the Illawarra, and in 1996 Noarlunga in South Australia, have sought official WHO "Safe Communities" recognition.

Healthy Cities Illawarra has taken up the challenge to explore the potential of the Safe Communities concept. A workable partnership has been achieved in the Illawarra, capitalising on existing resources and introducing injury prevention to a well established program of community based initiatives.

Healthy Cities and Safe Communities Compared

The common ground between the two approaches is evident when comparing the Healthy Cities concept (in the terms of the Ottawa Charter) with the WHO Manifesto for Safe Communities (1989).

Healthy Cities Ottawa Charter 1986	Safe Communities Stockholm Manifesto 1989
Build healthy public policy	Formulate public policy for safety
Create supportive environments	Create supportive (safe) environments
Strengthen community action	Strengthen community action
Develop personal skills	
Reorientate health services	Broaden public services

Both approaches recognise the importance of intersectoral collaboration and community participative approaches.

The identification of lifestyle and environmental issues which impact on the health and well-being of the community is central to the Healthy Cities brief. Given their common principles and shared philosophies, it is surprising that more Healthy Cities around the world have not tackled the issue of injury prevention in their communities, particularly since injuries are known to be one of the most significant public health issues facing the world's population today.

The rapid spread and success of the Healthy Cities concept has been well documented and hardly needs recounting in detail. When the WHO (Europe) Healthy Cities Planning Group met in January 1986, a 5-8 city project was envisaged. By mid 1990, this had grown to around 400 project cities actively involved in the movement (Tsouros (Ed), 1990). By December 1993, when the First Global Conference on Healthy Cities was held in San Francisco, over one thousand cities worldwide were believed to have adopted the Healthy Cities concept.

Opportunities therefore exist in many communities, where well established and well resourced Healthy Cities programs exist, to address injury prevention at a local level using the holistic Safe Communities approach.

This process is also a cost effective alternative. Healthy Cities Illawarra was able to attract extra funds to establish the Safe Communities program whilst broadening its issue base. At the same time, the Safe Communities program was able to access existing Healthy Cities resources (e.g., office space, administrative and professional support, stable funding base, community contacts, etc.) and was relieved of the financial burden of establishment costs. It made logical and financial sense to set up in partnership with Healthy Cities rather than separately.

As has been the experience in the Illawarra, promotion of the two concepts under the one umbrella is contributing to the creation of a community which is both safer and healthier.

The Illawarra

The region is situated on the South Coast of New South Wales, approximately 80 kilometres south of Sydney. The Illawarra Safe Communities Program comprises the three local government areas of Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama, and has an area population of approximately 240,000. The word "Illawarra" is aboriginal dialect meaning "where the mountains look down on the sea".

Although the region has a predominantly industrial profile, it also has a rapidly expanding University and tourism industry, and is renowned for its natural beauty with mountains, rainforest areas and long sweeping beaches.

The population of the region is characterised by diversity with almost a quarter of the population being overseas born and half of these (or 13%) from non-English speaking countries.

The Illawarra region was selected as one of three pilot Healthy Cities established in Australia in 1987, funded by the now Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health.

Safe Communities - The Beginning

Child injury surveillance had commenced at four Illawarra hospital Accident and Emergency departments in November 1986. After accessing this data, Healthy Cities Illawarra was quick to recognise the need to address the significant child injury problem in the region. An intersectoral Child Injury Prevention Task Force was one of the original six task forces established by Healthy Cities Illawarra. Injury surveillance was also extended to "all ages, all injuries" at all four hospitals in 1992.

Intersectoral collaboration and community participation led to many successful child injury prevention programs. These ranged from a Safety in Schools project, to an extensive home safety and backyard injuries reduction campaign. These activities were felt to have contributed (in part) to a 17% reduction in children attending a local hospital Accident and Emergency Department during 1990-1992 (Booth et al, 1993) and reductions of more than 30% in school based injuries.

Following the success of Healthy Cities efforts in child injury prevention, further funding was obtained in 1992, from the Road Safety Bureau of the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) to establish a "Safe Communities" program. In February 1994, the Illawarra was proclaimed a WHO Safe Community by the WHO Collaborating Centre on Community Safety Promotion.

Management of the Program

A Management Committee oversees the Illawarra Safe Communities Program by administering funds and providing support and direction. The committee consists of the Manager, Healthy Cities Illawarra; the Road Safety Manager, RTA Southern Region and the Director, Illawarra Public Health Unit. It meets bi-monthly with the project leader and there is also frequent informal contact.

The Council of Reference consists of 28 members who represent a range of public and private sector organisations including local government, secondary and tertiary education, BHP, public health, RTA, local Chamber of Commerce and emergency services. This provides the program's vital links to the community and its organisations. The council meets on a six-monthly basis to exchange information, review progress and be part of the planning process for our program.

The Illawarra Safe Communities Program takes an active role in, and helps to resource two major task groups:

Illawarra Road Safety Group
Healthy Cities Illawarra Child Injury Prevention Task Force

In addition, Illawarra Safe Communities plays an important role in other intersectoral organisations, including the Safe Community Action Team (SCAT) - a Wollongong City Council crime prevention working party, and the Suicide Prevention Council.

Over the years, local injury data has been an important and useful tool to facilitate injury interventions. Unfortunately, injury surveillance processes have, at times, been unreliable; it

is hoped that the recent conversion to a computerised system which includes an injury minimum data set, will provide more reliable information.

Working at Local, State, National and International Levels

The majority of the program's activity occurs at the local level. Here, contributions to the program are predominantly through direct involvement of local representatives, either in task forces, projects or campaigns or through the identification of hazards and safety problems. Participants include teachers, health workers, doctors, hoteliers, taxi drivers, preschools, parent groups, students, volunteers, residents' action groups, private businesses, disability groups, service clubs and many others.

In the Illawarra program, a very significant contribution is made by the local media, without whose support it would be difficult to spread the Safe Communities message through such a large geographically dispersed population.

The Illawarra Safe Communities Program and Healthy Cities Illawarra have liaised with local politicians who have, in turn, lobbied the State and Federal Governments on issues such as pool fencing laws, car occupant restraint legislation and funding support. The University of Wollongong, Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences, has also recently offered support for an injury research project and some curriculum development to incorporate aspects of injury prevention into a course on Health Promotion.

At a national level, links exist with organisations such as the National Injury Surveillance Unit, but most importantly, with other community based injury prevention programs across Australia.

A loose network of around 25 programs has, in 1996, given rise to the establishment of the Australian Injury Prevention Network with an interim executive being elected. The network aims to provide opportunities for information exchange between researchers, policy makers and practitioners from all sectors, encourage intersectoral and interdisciplinary collaboration and advocate for the implementation of appropriate injury prevention policies, legislation and programs.

The Illawarra has also played a role in promoting the safe communities concept internationally. The program has made representation and valuable contributions at a number of conferences including the 3rd International Conference on Safe Communities in Harstad, Norway in 1994 and the 5th International Conference on Safe Communities in Victoria, Australia (1996). Notably, at the most recent conference, Professor Leif Svanstrom of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Injury Prevention acknowledged Australia as a world leader in the safe communities movement.

Following the 5th International Conference in Victoria the Illawarra hosted part of the 8th WHO Travelling Seminar. A group of delegates from countries including Croatia, Vietnam, Sweden, Thailand, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe and Kenya visited the region and experienced first hand some of the safe communities initiatives. The group visited the Lake Illawarra Road Safety Park, Mount Brown Public School to hear about the Student Committees for Injury Prevention (SCIP) Program and BHP for an Occupational Health and Safety presentation and plant inspection.

Recent Projects

Road Safety is an ongoing priority and specific projects have focussed on issues such as occupant restraint, and in particular the correct fitting and use of child restraints. Bicycle safety and road safety are combined at the Lake Illawarra Road Safety Park which was established after considerable lobbying by the Child Injury Prevention Task Force and the Safe Communities Program.

In 1995 a Safety Display Home was opened to the public. The project was a collaborative effort between Illawarra Safe Communities, Health Promotion and a private building contractor, Re-Lye-Able Homes. The house displays a number of safety design features both in its overall design as well as in its inclusions and has remained open to the public for over a year.

Through the Child Injury Prevention Task Force, the problem of dog bite injuries to children is being addressed with the development of a Stop-A-Bite campaign. The Illawarra Safe Communities Program has worked with local council officers, the RSPCA, vets and the private sector to develop a brochure and promote a video. Safe Communities has also lobbied strongly on the issue of gun control.

Conclusions

Healthy Cities Illawarra's strategic plan cites their mission as "to create a cleaner, greener, safer and more caring environment which is supportive of better health".

Through the Safe Communities program, injury prevention has been placed on the agenda of many local organisations, government departments and community groups, many of which had already well established links with Healthy Cities Illawarra.

Injury worldwide is a major health problem. For programs to be effective partnerships must be fostered with other organisations to bring about a culture of safety.

The Illawarra experience demonstrates the complementary nature of the Healthy Cities and Safe Communities approaches. Community networks and alliances established by a Healthy Cities program can be effectively used to introduce injury prevention initiatives which are relevant and responsive to local needs.

References

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