

# The Healthy Male

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## Loneliness can be just as bad for your health as smoking

A recent study published in the Public Library of Science Medicine indicates that having a poor social network is just as bad for a person's health as heavy smoking and drinking, and twice as bad for one's health as being obese.<sup>1</sup>

The study, which involved analysis of more than a century's worth of papers (1900 to 2007) on social relationships and mortality, showed that people with adequate social relationships had a "50 per cent greater likelihood of survival compared to those with poor or insufficient social relationships".

According to the authors, this effect was comparable with quitting smoking and outstripped many well-known risk factors for mortality such as obesity and physical inactivity.

The researchers behind this study said there were two ways a social network of friends and family could contribute to good

health – the support of others might help reduce the harmful effects of stress, and the influence of others could also encourage behaviour that contributed to good health.

Australia's recently released National Male Health Policy recognises the impact of social isolation on health. The Policy encourages a move towards social connectedness with the support of Men's Sheds, an initiative which is in line with the recommendations proposed by the authors.

They suggested health care policies and public health initiatives could benefit from considering social factors in efforts to reduce mortality, because "social relationship-based interventions represent a major opportunity to enhance not only the quality of life but also survival".

<sup>1</sup> Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB, 2010 Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review PLoS Med 7(7): e1000316. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316



## From the Director

Welcome to the final edition of *The Healthy Male* for 2010, Andrology Australia's 10th year.

Feelings of loneliness or isolation can affect us all at different stages of life, and can have a huge impact on our health. This edition will explore some ways men can deal with social isolation, particularly through initiatives like Men's Sheds or by using new web technologies to connect with others. Evaluation of these and similar initiatives may help us understand how they improve the health of Australian men.

During the past 10 years, Andrology Australia has made great inroads into raising awareness of male reproductive health. Part of our success in establishing a community presence in men's health is due to our ambassador, former Test cricketer Merv Hughes. During 2010, Merv has once again traversed the country to spread Andrology Australia's health messages

and to encourage men to talk about their "tackle". As always, we are very grateful for Merv's support and look forward to working with him again in the New Year.

In other news, Andrology Australia is developing a men's health education program for practice nurses that will be piloted in 2011. It's a timely intervention given the newly released National Male Health Policy, and the recognition that workforce capacity in men's health needs to improve across all sectors.

We wish you a safe, sociable and fun holiday season, and we look forward to continuing to bring important men's health issues to the fore in 2011.

Professor Rob McLachlan

## Community education

### Testing your testes in the shower

More than 680 Australians are diagnosed with testicular cancer each year – it's the second most common form of cancer in men aged 18 to 39.

While the causes of testicular cancer are largely unknown, with early detection it has a very high cure rate (95 per cent).

To encourage men to become more aware of changes in their testes and promote early detection, Andrology Australia is supporting a Southern General Practice Network (SGPN) health promotion initiative to create a shower hanger that explains how to perform self-examination as well as collaborating with SGPN to make this health promotion tool more widely available.

The waterproof shower hangers contain information from Andrology Australia's popular testicular self-examination fact sheet.

Regular self-examination of the testes to check for lumps or swelling is important, particularly for those at risk of testicular cancer such as men with a history of undescended testes at birth, men with previous testicular cancer, men with previous infertility, and men with Down syndrome.

A testicular self-examination is important to help find any changes in the testis early, so that if treatment is needed, it can start as early as possible.

If lumps, swelling, pain or changes are detected a man should see a doctor straight away.

While these issues do not necessarily mean cancer is present, it is important to see a doctor to make sure any problems are properly identified and treated.



In line with the distribution of the shower hanger, Andrology Australia is also releasing an updated testicular cancer fact sheet.

Please check the website for details, [www.andrologyaustralia.org](http://www.andrologyaustralia.org).

## Professional education

### Practice nurses to drive men's health education

Andrology Australia is leading an education program on men's health, which is being developed by practice nurses – for practice nurses.

As Australia's health care emphasis becomes more focused on prevention and primary health care, practice nurses will be well placed to deliver essential education, health promotion and referral services.

The education program, developed by the Andrology Australia Practice Nurse Education Reference Group, is a timely intervention given the recognition in the recent National Male Health Policy. The Policy confirms that co-ordinated action across the workforce sectors will be a key driver of change to improve the health of all Australian men.

The program was initiated after a survey of Australian Practice Nurses Association (APNA) members revealed the majority of them had never undertaken professional education on male reproductive health topics such as erectile dysfunction and prostate disease.



More than 75 per cent of survey respondents indicated they would like further education on men's health issues within general practice, while almost two-thirds (61 per cent) did not know where to find evidence-based men's health resources.

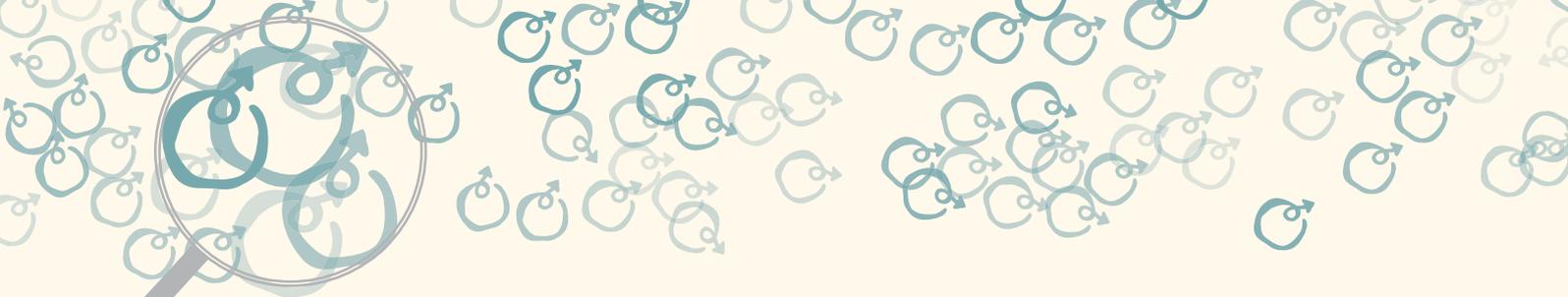
As a result of the survey, Andrology Australia established a Practice Nurse Education Reference Group consisting of practice nurses and nurse practitioners from across Australia. Through extensive collaboration, the reference group's expertise has directed the development of a "train-the-trainer" education module suitable for a range of settings including community health and general practice, addressing the needs of both rural and metropolitan environments.

The education module will address the major health problems of Australian males, primary health care access, the role of the practice nurse and strategies to engage men in discussion about their health, including sensitive issues.

The module will undergo extensive review and piloting in 2011 prior to national roll-out, primarily through Divisions of General Practice/GP networks.

The education will also be accredited through the Royal College of Nursing Australia and APNA, as part of nurses' ongoing professional development.

For more information about primary health care nurse men's health education, please contact Taletha Rizio, [taletha.rizio@monash.edu](mailto:taletha.rizio@monash.edu) or phone 03 9594 7162.



## Focus on: Social isolation – how sheds an



Image: Courtesy of Gary Green, Australian Men's Sheds Association

### The Social Round

*"I might have known," said Eeyore. "After all, one can't complain. I have my friends. Somebody spoke to me only yesterday. And was it last week or the week before that Rabbit bumped into me and said 'Bother!! The Social Round. Always something going on.'"*  
(A.A. Milne, Winnie the Pooh)<sup>1</sup>

Humans are naturally social. Social networks provide us with emotional, psychological and material support to cope with stress.<sup>2</sup> What happens then, when we become socially isolated? Today, people in Western countries no longer live in extended families – they often live thousands of kilometres or even across the world from their relatives, and more and more people are living alone.<sup>3</sup> Loneliness is becoming increasingly common and tends to affect men more than women.<sup>4</sup> Older males are particularly vulnerable to social isolation as they often live on their own, may not have access to transport, and are no longer in the workforce.<sup>4</sup>

A recent study indicates that having a poor social network is just as bad for a person's health as heavy smoking and drinking, and twice as bad for one's health as being obese.<sup>3</sup> The study showed that people with adequate social relationships had a "50 per cent greater likelihood of survival compared to those with poor or insufficient social relationships"<sup>3</sup>

The researchers suggested two ways a social network of friends and family could contribute to good health – the support of others might help reduce the harmful effects of stress, and the influence of others could also encourage behaviour that contributes to good health.<sup>3</sup>

### How does social isolation affect people in rural areas?

Gordon Gregory, Executive Director of The National Rural Health Alliance, says community and social activities are of major importance in rural and remote areas, and are keys to good health.

"We now know that the number and quality of social connections you have impacts on your physical and psychological health. The social isolation that men and others in rural areas experience is a characteristic of places which are sparse and lack social infrastructure. But this kind of isolation is not determined by geography only. It can be caused by lack of income, lack of transport, mental health issues, language issues, disabilities, or even oral and dental health problems. Also, social isolation for one man may be another man's independent, contented and untroubled lifestyle. So the first question is, is the isolation a problem? If yes, we know it is going to be harder to mediate in rural areas."

Mr Gregory says initiatives like Men's Sheds – a space for older men to go to enjoy others' company and do things that give them a sense of purpose – are a great way to break down social isolation in rural communities.

### How can Men's Sheds help?

"Men don't talk face to face – they talk shoulder to shoulder," is the motto of the Australian Men's Sheds Association. A paper presented at the National Rural Health Conference in 2009 showed benefits of involvement in Men's Sheds included enhanced self esteem, decreased social isolation, and friendship.<sup>5</sup> The sheds provide a workshop-style space for men to do hands-on activities like making or restoring furniture, fixing cars and bikes, or working on another community project. They also provide support for men with disabilities, and those who find themselves unemployed.<sup>5</sup>



Image: Courtesy of Gary Green, Australian Men's Sheds Association

# And computers are helping men 'get out there'

"Our society and our upbringing have taught us men not to talk about our feelings, not to reveal our emotions and to place our health low on our personal priority scale," Australian Men's Sheds Association Community Engagement Coordinator Gary Green says. "Unlike women, most men find it difficult to talk about their emotions and this can contribute to the fact they are reluctant to seek help. Men are less healthy than women, we drink more, we take more risks and we suffer more from isolation, loneliness and depression. Becoming a 'Men's Shedder' means that a man can participate, with other men, in a safe, meaningful activity based environment that is 'men friendly' and provides mateship and support. And, importantly, there is no pressure. Men can just come and have a yarn and a cuppa if that is all they're looking for."

The Men's Sheds initiative is effective because it can reach older and isolated men that would not usually be part of men's health programs.<sup>6</sup> Men from all walks of life, a wide range of backgrounds and varying skill levels, can join. Mr Green says men are often seen as the hardest group to engage with, yet there is little encouragement within our society for men to take an interest in their own health and well-being. "Men's Sheds are proving that if we work with their strengths and if we provide 'men friendly' environments, then we can effectively engage with men in health service delivery."

*"Unlike women, most men find it difficult to talk about their emotions ..."*

## What about new technologies?

Men are generally enthusiastic users of a wide range of new technologies such as mobile phone applications and social networking.<sup>7</sup> A number of health organisations are beginning to harness this interest to develop services, information and products that engage men so they take action to improve their health and stay connected with others.

One way for men to feel connected to a community is through the various and growing forms of social media now available via the internet. According to the recent Nielsen Social Media Report, "online social networking has become increasingly ingrained in Australians' everyday lives."<sup>8</sup> Now more than 35 per cent of internet users interact with others on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, daily or more often.<sup>8</sup> And these sites are not just for the younger generation. Older Australians are now responsible for extending the reach of online social networking.<sup>9</sup> These new channels aid communication, socialising, information gathering, and information dissemination.

A 2009 US survey which explored how people used the internet and mobile phones to interact with key family and friends showed that people's social worlds were enhanced by new communication

technologies. The Pew Internet report found that people who used modern information and communication technologies had larger and more diverse social networks.<sup>9</sup> "There is a tendency by critics to blame technology first when social change occurs," argues lead author Professor Keith Hampton. "This is the first research that actually explores the connection between technology use and social isolation and we find the opposite. People use the technology to stay in touch and share information in ways that keep them socially active and connected to their communities ... It is a mistake to believe that internet use and mobile phones plunge people into a spiral of isolation."

From this survey, it's easy to see how useful new technologies could be in promoting men's health – they allow men to stay connected with others even if they have no access to transport or are too ill to attend community events. It allows some form of peer support and gives family, friends and communities a chance to make contact with men who have become isolated.

There is increasing evidence that information and services provided through the internet and new technologies can be used to improve men's health outcomes.<sup>10</sup> Andrology Australia's website ([www.andrologyaustralia.org](http://www.andrologyaustralia.org)) attracts more than 680,000 unique visitors a year. Since 2005, more than a million male reproductive health resources have been downloaded from the site, with the number of resource downloads growing exponentially each year. Andrology Australia has also taken its first steps into the realm of social media and is gradually building its network.

In December, an online initiative that aims to combine both new technologies and traditional forms of social networks is being launched in Victoria. The Shed Online ([www.theshedonline.org.au](http://www.theshedonline.org.au)) is an internet-based social community for men founded by beyondblue, The Movember Foundation and the Australian Men's Shed Association.<sup>11</sup>

It is encouraging to see that men's relationships and social networks are being addressed by the National Male Health Policy, which was launched earlier this year. The Policy makes it clear that healthy social networks provide men with similar positive benefits to successful marriages or committed couple relationships.<sup>12</sup> They provide enjoyment of life, more resilience, and better physical and mental health.

While some men may feel like they don't need friends and social networks as much as women, it's crucial they make the effort to maintain interests and social contacts, or risk serious health consequences.

**\*This article was compiled by Andrology Australia, with contributions from The National Rural Health Alliance and the Australian Men's Sheds Association.**

For a full list of references, please email [sophia.browne@monash.edu](mailto:sophia.browne@monash.edu)



## Recent events

### Merv tells men to 'talk about their tackle'

Andrology Australia Ambassador and former Test cricketer Merv Hughes has once again travelled across the country to encourage men to "talk about their tackle".

Each year, Merv travels to regional communities across Australia – speaking at men's health events, reminding men to look after their reproductive health, and promoting the resources and programs available through Andrology Australia.

In April, Merv travelled to Goondiwindi in rural Queensland for a men's health promotion weekend organised by the 'Tie Up the Black Dog Committee'. While in Goondiwindi, Merv spoke at a men's health cricket day and a post-event dinner. The following day, he was involved in a golf tournament, which included a pit stop program 'health check' at each of the holes.

In May, Merv visited Tamworth in New South Wales to speak at a men's health evening run by the North West Slopes Division of General Practice and Hunter New England Health.

More than 250 locals attended for the pit stop program and dinner, and listened to Merv speak about the importance of reproductive and general health.

Later in the month, Merv travelled to Tallangatta in Victoria for an event organised by the Towong Community Recovery Committee, which included a free pit stop health screening. More than 200 people – aged from 18 to 85 – came along for the evening.

In June, Merv went to Cobram, Victoria to speak at a men's mental and general health pit stop evening organised by the Goulburn Valley Division of General Practice.

More than 250 men attended the event for a health check-up followed by a dinner, where Merv spoke about the need for men to have regular health checks, and the importance of detecting reproductive health problems early.

In September, Merv visited Mudgee in central west New South Wales to officially open the Mudgee Men's Shed and speak to workers at the local coal mines of Wilpinjong and Moolarben.

This men's health promotion was organised by the Greater Western Area Health Service.

Finally, in November, Merv headed off to Hamilton in western Victoria for an event titled, "A Moment with Merv: The behind the box tour", organised by the Western District Health Service. More than 100 locals went along to hear about why they should pay attention to their health.

Andrology Australia would like to thank the organisers and sponsors of all of the community events, and particularly our ambassador Merv Hughes, for their support in raising the profile of men's health across Australia.



## Research round-up

### Population screening for prostate cancer: the debate goes on...



Australia does not have a population screening program for prostate cancer using prostate specific antigen (PSA) testing because there is not enough evidence that the benefits outweigh the risks. Despite this, PSA testing is widespread – more than 50 per cent of Australian men over 50 years are having the test.<sup>1</sup>

The main potential benefit of PSA screening would be a reduction in numbers of deaths from prostate cancer through early detection and treatment. The risks of screening include the diagnosis of slow growing cancers that may never cause problems, but once detected, are likely to be managed with treatments that have potentially serious side-effects.

One recent research publication<sup>2</sup> and two reviews<sup>3,4</sup>, have contributed to the debate about PSA screening. A Swedish randomised trial<sup>2</sup> of about 20,000 men showed a 56 per cent reduction in prostate cancer deaths in men aged 50 to 64, who were followed for 14 years. This is a greater reduction than shown in any other study. These results are partly related to the fact that there was little PSA testing happening in Sweden outside the study and men were followed very carefully for repeat screening, diagnosis and treatment.

In contrast to these findings, a recent Cochrane review<sup>3</sup> and another systematic review<sup>4</sup>, showed no significant reduction in deaths due to prostate cancer in screened men compared to control men, when data from several randomised trials from various countries were analysed together. Both reviews also noted that good information about effects of screening on quality of life and costs associated with screening is lacking and conclude that population screening programs cannot be recommended at this time.

So, what do these studies mean to a man in Australia deciding about PSA testing? What is clear is that men need access to good quality, evidence-based information about the possible benefits and risks of PSA testing. Taking into account specific circumstances such as age and family history of cancer, a shared decision-making process between a man and his doctor can help a man come to a decision he can be comfortable with, whatever the outcome.

**For a range of prostate cancer resources for both GPs and the general public, please visit [www.andrologyaustralia.org](http://www.andrologyaustralia.org).**

- 1 Carriere P, Baade P, Newman B, Aitken J, Janda M. Cancer screening in Queensland men. *Med J Aust* 2007; 186:404-7.
- 2 Hugosson J et al. Mortality results from the Goteborg randomised population-based prostate-cancer screening trial. *Lancet Oncology* 2010; 11: 725-732.
- 3 Ilic D, et al. Screening for prostate cancer (update of 2006 review). *Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2010:CD004720.
- 4 Djulbegovic M, et al. Screening for prostate cancer: systematic review and meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials. *BMJ* 2010;341:c4543.

## In brief

### Connect with Andrology Australia via social media



Andrology Australia has taken its first steps into the world of social media. We now have profiles on Twitter and Facebook, as well as a YouTube presence. If you use any of these services, connect with us and stay informed on the latest happenings in men's health.

### The Healthy Male Readership Survey

In 2011, *The Healthy Male* will undergo a bit of a refurbishment. To have your say on how this newsletter should look and which features you like, please complete and return the enclosed readership survey by January 21, or lodge your thoughts in our online survey at [www.andrologyaustralia.org](http://www.andrologyaustralia.org). As an added bonus, everyone who completes the survey will go into the draw for a **chance to win a \$100 gift card**. Don't forget to include a contact phone number or email address so we can reach you if you are the lucky winner.

### A thank you gift

As a thank you to our readers and supporters, we have enclosed a 2011 Andrology Australia desktop calendar with this edition of *The Healthy Male*. We wish you all a happy, healthy and productive 2011.



### Close of office

The Andrology Australia office will be closed for resource orders from December 17 to January 7, inclusive. Please ensure all orders are placed in advance if any resources are needed during this time.

## Latest news

### Viagra should not be sold in Australian supermarkets

Viagra® is being sold in UK supermarket pharmacies without the need for a doctor's consultation but this practice should not be adopted in Australia.

According to a recent edition of *Medical Observer*, the UK's Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Agency has granted permission for a retailer to sell Viagra® under a special licence known as a 'patient group direction'.

This means patients will need to complete a questionnaire along with some general tests for blood pressure, diabetes and cholesterol.

Even so, Andrology Australia would not endorse a similar practice here.

Erectile dysfunction is often a symptom of a more serious illness and if men are not seeking proper medical advice they may be jeopardising their health. Important conditions could be missed without a proper face to face assessment.

### Are you supporting IMHW in 2011?

International Men's Health Week (IMHW) will be held from June 13 to 19 in 2011. As many high-profile events and activities are held during this week, it significantly raises public awareness of men's health issues and may help you to raise the awareness of your own event.

To make sure you are supported in holding a successful men's health event in 2011, Andrology Australia is again providing a range of free men's health promotional resources. Posters for IMHW 2011 will soon be available to help you promote your event and men's health in general in your local community. Keep an eye out for the 2011 theme!

**To view and order free men's health resources available at no cost, visit [www.andrologyaustralia.org](http://www.andrologyaustralia.org).**

### Newsletter of Andrology Australia

Australian Centre of Excellence in Male Reproductive Health

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