

Public Health Promotion Project Plan: Mental Health in Prisoners

Introduction

The Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders experience high rates of imprisonment, and this rate is steadily increasing. Additionally, the likelihood of Indigenous ex-prisoners getting arrested again and serving multiple short prison sentences is very high (Lloyd et al., 2017). A study conducted by Baldry et al. (2012) has reported high rates of mental illness or cognitive disabilities in Indigenous people who get arrested or after their release from prison. Not only do they have higher rates of mental illness as compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts, but they also have higher rates of mental conditions as compared to other Indigenous people who have never been arrested. Therefore, it is essential to address mental health issues in this specific community, in order to ensure that they do not commit criminal acts in the future. This paper intends to outline a mental health promotion project for male Indigenous prisoners who show signs of mental illness while in custody. It will describe the target community, aims of the project, specific actions, and evaluation methods.

Health Promotion and Target Group Outline

Given the cultural diversity of the Australian population, this is heavily reflected in the Australian prison population too, wherein the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders account for 28% of the population and the non-Indigenous communities account for only 3% of the prison population. The remaining population of prisoners include Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) people who belong to non-English speaking backgrounds, and other people who have migrated from English-speaking countries (Rose et al., 2019). Studies have shown disproportionately high rates of mental illness in prisoners with as high as 36% of the prison population having anxiety and stress-related disorders. Other mental health disorders diagnosed in prisoners include psychotic symptoms, mood disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Jakobowitz et al., 2017). As a result, based on the statistics, the specific target community that will be used for mental health promotion in prisoners is Indigenous male

prisoners currently residing at the Goulburn Correctional Centre in Goulburn, New South Wales (NSW).

The Indigenous population accounts for around 3% of the total Australian population, and they represent one of the world's oldest and most diverse cultural groups. Despite this, the prevalence of mental health disorders in the Indigenous population is 4.3% as opposed to 1.7% in the non-Indigenous communities (Nasir et al., 2018). Despite its low representation in the general population, the Indigenous community represents 28% of the prison population in Australia and this specific group is at a heightened risk for developing mental health conditions (Perdacher et al., 2019). The factors that contribute to high rates of imprisonment of the Indigenous people include alcohol and substance abuse, illiteracy, unemployment, and history of abuse or violence. These risk factors are also found to be common for contributing to mental illness in Indigenous prisoners (Shepherd et al., 2014).

The mental health status of the Indigenous community is a vicious cycle wherein mental illness is an underlying cause for a person to commit a crime, and his arrest and subsequent imprisonment worsens his mental illness. As a result, the prospect of an Indigenous prisoner making a new life for himself is extremely low because his disturbed mental and emotional health will induce him to commit more crimes in the future. Therefore, this public health promotion plan intends to work with Indigenous prisoners with mental health issues, so that once they are released from prison, they don't fall back into the life of crime and violence, and can lead happy and respectful lives as good citizens. This target community will benefit from the project in terms of good mental, emotional, and physical health making them capable of leading contented personal and professional lives after their release from prison.

Health Promotion Aims

The primary aim of this public health promotion project is to identify and address underlying mental health conditions in male prisoners of the Goulberg Correctional Centre, ensuring that they have sound mental and emotional health upon their release. The rationale for this is to address and remove at least one of the contributing factors to

violent crimes in the country that may arise due to low self-esteem and lack of financial prospects upon release from prison.

The objectives of the public health promotion project are as follows:

- To narrow down the list of people in the target group who are Aboriginals or Torres Strait Islanders, and assess them for signs and symptoms of any mental health disorders
- To conduct interviews by trained psychiatrists to identify the propensity of these people to commit crimes upon release from prison
- To deliver mental health interventions as appropriate to the identified high-risk group of prisoners so that their likelihood of committing acts of violence in the future is brought down considerably and they are capable of getting employed and leading a good life after release from prison

Health Promotion Prevention Management Perspectives

Health promotion management projects are broadly classified as primary, secondary, and tertiary based on the specific stage of a physical or mental condition when the proposed health plan is delivered. Primary health plans are those that are targeted to the healthy population with the objective of preventing disease in the future. This may be based on demographic, geographical, or occupational risk factors. Secondary health plans aim to identify diseases at their early stages and implement interventions immediately so that these stages are rapidly cured and further progression of the disease is limited. Tertiary health plans target people who already show a majority of the symptoms of a disease and aim to help them manage their condition through appropriate therapies and lifestyle changes (Fleming and Parker, 2015).

This public health promotion project may fall under either the secondary or the tertiary category based on the state of the mental health disorder displayed by the target group members. The aim of this project is to target both the people who previously have mental illness that has provoked them to commit crimes and get arrested, and those who have developed mental health disorders after their imprisonment. As a secondary

health plan, it will address imprisonment as the cause for the mental health disorder and manage it appropriately. As a tertiary health plan, it will probe other underlying factors that have contributed to the acts of violence exhibited by the person and plan interventions that target the root cause of underlying mental health conditions.

Stakeholders and Community Consultation

The most important stakeholders for this health promotion plan are the prisoners themselves as mental health promotion in this population will ensure that they have a crime-free life with sound physical, mental, and emotional health. This health promotion project will improve their quality of life both while they are in prison as well as after completing their prison sentence. Apart from them, the other important stakeholders are mental health practitioners and community mental health workers who cater to the mental health needs of a large population who are inclined towards aggressive or violent behaviours.

Other stakeholders at the community level include non-profit organizations, mental health educators, and mental health-specific organizations such as Mental Health Australia, Sane Australia, Mind Australia, and beyondblue. These organizations work hard to eliminate mental health illnesses from the Indigenous population so that they can have an enhanced quality of life both personally and professionally. Most importantly, the Australian government is also a stakeholder in this health promotion project as mental illness in the Indigenous population contributes to a major financial burden to the nation. Additionally, it increases the risk of mentally ill prisoners committing future crimes if their mental health condition is not managed appropriately (Department of Health, 2020).

Health Message

Given that the target group for this health promotion project is Indigenous prisoners who show signs of mental illness, a specific health message for making them aware and open to interventions is as follows:

“Going back or moving forward? Take a step in the right direction!”

Underlying mental health conditions can affect your quality of life post-prison and hamper your future prospects. They can dissuade you from achieving your goals and having a well-balanced family life. Make use of this opportunity in identifying these conditions so that you are ready for a happy and successful life once you leave prison.

This one-liner along with the message will be used on all marketing collaterals such as flyers, brochures, invitations, and welcome boards during the course of this health promotion project.

Health Promotion Activity Description

As the entire target group is found in one location, it will be easy to promote this health promotion project to the community. A detailed list of all male Indigenous prisoners residing in the chosen prison will be obtained from the authorities and they will be encouraged to participate in the health promotion activities. However, in order to ensure that Indigenous prisoners participate in this project voluntarily, the objectives and benefits of this project will be delivered in detail over several sessions. This will ensure that the participants are aware of the risks and possibilities of mental illness, and are ready to have themselves diagnosed for the same. Their voluntary participation in this project will make it easier to suggest and implement interventions for identified mental health conditions so that they can benefit from the project after their release from prison.

A qualified and experienced psychiatrist will be asked to interview each of the participants in an initial screening process to detect signs of any underlying mental, emotional, or behavioural disorder. After this stage, only those people who show moderate to severe symptoms of mental illness will be chosen for further stages of the project. The screened participants will be evaluated for their likelihood of committing acts of violence in the future as a consequence of their mental condition. Based on the results acquired at this stage, each of the participants will be subjected to specific interventions to treat the underlying cause that may cause aggression in the person. For instance, risk assessment tools such as the Psychopathy Checklist and the Violent Risk Appraisal Guide may be used to assess the risk of committing violence in the

participants (Abbiati et al., 2018). Some suitable interventions may include preventive or restrictive measures to prevent and manage aggressive behaviours in the participants (Lantta et al., 2020).

Health Promotion Evaluation Proposal

This project will need to be evaluated through a longitudinal follow-up strategy over a period of 2 to 3 years. During this period, each of the participants will be directed to come in for weekly check-ups and a detailed account of their activities through the week will be noted. Every participant's notes will be analysed for any documented acts of violence and aggression. Additionally, each participant's quality of life will also be documented in detail with regards to life partner and family life, employment status, hobbies, and social life. All these factors will be evaluated in the context of the participants leading a healthy life without any motivation to engage in violent or aggressive behaviours. The number of Indigenous prisoners who have benefited from this health promotion project will be noted and using this number, the success of the programme will be evaluated.

Conclusion

The Indigenous population suffers from a large number of physical and mental conditions due to several factors such as a history of abuse, financial constraints, and lack of access to quality healthcare services. A more vulnerable sub-group of this community is people who have been arrested for criminal activities, as they are often condemned to a life of judgment and isolation. Hence, targeting this group of people can help improve their prospect of living a happy and healthy life in their communities, and possibly contribute to improving mental health outcomes in their regions. A second advantage of this project, if successful, will be bringing down the likelihood of these people committing crimes in the future, thereby decreasing the incidence of violent crimes in the country.

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