

healthier work

CASE STUDY: ACT GOVERNMENT HEALTH DIRECTORATE



Name and position of person completing the survey:

Merryn Hare
Director, Health Promotion Branch
ACT Government Health Directorate

Number of employees within organisation:

There are approximately 6,000 employees of the Health Directorate located across a number of sites in Canberra, including the Canberra Hospital and a number of regional health centres. The workforce is also fairly diverse and includes medical and health professionals, administrative staff and shift workers. Of our staff, 77 % are female and around 68% are aged over 45 years of age.

Brief description of your organisation:

The Health Directorate provides healthcare and health-related services to the residents of the ACT and surrounds, and includes the Canberra Hospital and community based health centres.

Why did your organisation start a workplace health and wellbeing program?

The Health Directorate has, over a number of years, implemented a range of health and wellbeing activities for staff, including a Smokefree policy with staff access to smoking cessation supports, an employee assistance program and an early intervention physiotherapy service.

The Health Directorate also has a strategic focus on the prevention of chronic disease. In 2008, this focus was further enhanced when

the ACT Government became a signatory to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Partnership Agreement on Preventive Health (NPAPH). Under this agreement the ACT Government has further committed to reducing the risk of chronic disease by embedding healthy behaviours in settings, including workplaces.

This new policy context focusing on the workplace as a setting for prevention has provided an opportunity for the Health Directorate to consider the development of a comprehensive staff health and wellbeing program. It was also acknowledged that the Health Directorate should demonstrate its leadership in this area in order to effectively drive the workplace health agenda at the local level.

What did the organisation do to get a health and wellbeing program started?

A submission to the Executive of the Health Directorate was prepared with some initial strategies suggested to consolidate what the Directorate was already doing in this space under the banner of a single program and to build momentum for expanding these activities, particularly through staff engagement. The submission also proposed longer term strategies that could then be undertaken to develop a more comprehensive staff health and wellbeing program.

Staff were invited through a competition to develop a name for the program and *my health* was selected. Also, an intranet website was created to bring together information on health and wellbeing for staff.



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A Reference Group was also established to guide the *my health* program, drawing membership from our many sites and work areas. This Group has been valuable in engaging a broader range of staff and gaining better insight into what staff are looking for in a program.

To gain a better understanding of the key health issues for staff, as well as what they wanted from a program, we conducted the online ACT Employee Health and Wellbeing Survey in May 2011 that looked at key risk factors for chronic disease, including nutrition, physical activity, alcohol consumption, healthy weight, smoking and mental health.

On completion of the survey, staff received an individualised report and at an organisational level the Health Directorate received a de-identified aggregate report highlighting key health risk factors for our workforce, as well as ideas for what staff wanted from the program.

Whilst we would have liked a bigger response rate, it was good to see that the survey results indicated that the health status of Health Directorate staff in most areas was better than that of ACT workers generally. The results around smoking and alcohol consumption were particularly encouraging, however, the levels of psychological distress reported was of concern.

This survey, combined with an audit of our facilities and policies, provided us with clearer information to develop a more integrated health and wellbeing action plan.

Were there any barriers that had to be overcome to get the program started? If so, how did you achieve this?

With such a large and diverse workforce located over many sites, communication with staff has been challenging. Many staff do not have regular access to computers for other than direct service provision purposes, and a large number of them undertake shift work.

One strategy utilised to address this has been attending staff team meetings across the Health Directorate to talk about the *my health*

program. Many work areas have also added health and wellbeing as a regular agenda item at weekly staff meetings and at the very least can discuss the weekly health and wellbeing messages and up-coming events which are generated as part of the program.

Another useful strategy has been to identify interested people across the Health Directorate to act as “workplace champions” and to be a conduit for information on *my health* activities for their work areas. The work of these champions has been valuable.

“I knew I was not healthy enough but completing the survey and reading the results gave me the wake-up call I needed to begin doing something about it.”

Staff member who completed the online ACT Employee Health and Wellbeing Survey

What were some of the initial strategies of your health and wellbeing program?

Some of the initial strategies of the *my health* program included:

- establishment of a *my health* intranet website;
- setting up walking groups;
- encouraging participation by staff in health days and events such as Stress Down Day, RSPCA Million Paws Walk, Dry July and Canberra Times Fun Run and Walk;
- promotion of the Employee Assistance Program through a series of lunch time stress management talks;
- commencement of the development of a policy on healthy food and drink choices, covering the provision of vending machines, catering for events, fundraising activities and food services within the Health Directorate; and
- establishment of the ‘Beat It: Physical Activity & Lifestyle Program’ for employees with, or at risk of, lifestyle related chronic diseases.

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The *my health* dragon boat team participating in the Chinese New Year Challenge in February 2012

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What strategies have been effective in achieving staff participation in health and wellbeing initiatives?

Management support is one strategy we found very effective when conducting the online ACT Employee Health and Wellbeing Survey. When our Director-General sent out a message urging staff to participate, we had a three percent increase in response rates within the next 24 hour period.

What are some of the benefits that have been achieved as a result of your organisation's health and wellbeing program?

The *my health* program is still in its early stages but one of the initial benefits has been its demonstration of the Directorate's commitment to the health and wellbeing of staff. The program has also allowed the Directorate to better promote the range of initiatives that it already had available for staff in this space, which staff may not have been aware of.

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Have you been able to measure the return on investment since implementing your health and wellbeing program? If so, what were you able to measure and what results have you seen to date?

Evaluation has been incorporated into our planning for *my health*. Although the program is in its early stages, we have established an evaluation framework which will assist us to monitor and evaluate the program, and build learnings into future planning for the program.

Would you be willing to speak with other workplaces that need help or advice developing a health and wellbeing program?

For more information on the *my health* program please contact Merryn Hare, Director Health Promotion Branch, ACT Government Health Directorate

Ph: (02) 62051107 or email: merryn.hare@act.gov.au

If you would like to share your organisation would like to share its health and wellbeing experiences with other workplaces, please contact the Healthier Work team by emailing healthierwork@act.gov.au or phoning 02 6207 3000 (option 1, then 4).