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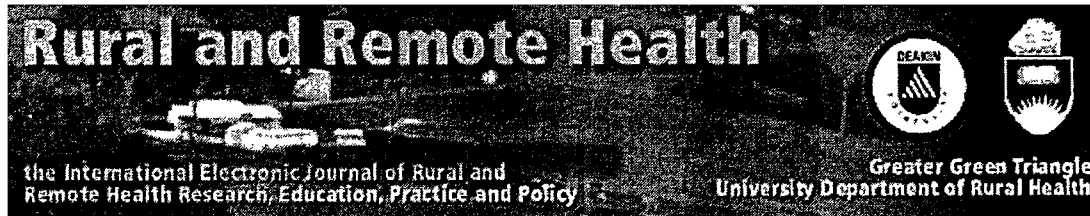
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Original Research

Playing their part: the role of physical activity and sport in sustaining the health and well being of small rural communities

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ABSTRACT

It is widely recognised that the health of rural Australians is poor in comparison with their urban counterparts. Similarly, the role played by physical activity in maintaining health has been well researched and is well documented. However, little appears to have been published in recent years about the links between physical activity and health in rural communities. The objective of this paper is to begin to address that gap.

This paper draws on research conducted in two small Victorian rural communities, and highlights the role that physical activity and sport play in sustaining the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities in rural areas. Taking the World Health Organisation's¹ definition of health ("a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease") as its measure, the paper highlights the many ways in which physical activity and sport in rural communities contribute to physical health, mental wellbeing and social cohesiveness.

Based on the findings of the study, the authors suggest that physical activity and sport make a significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of rural people and their communities. Further research is necessary to better define this apparent contribution.

ARTICLE

Introduction

When the younger of my two brothers was 15 years old, he was (despite his disinterest in the game and his low level of the particular skills needed) pressured into playing football for the local team in the small rural community of which we were a part. The team, you see, was short of players, and if he didn't participate, chances were that the team would fold and the cohesion that existed amongst the community of scattered farms in the area would disappear. And so he played his part, not just in keeping the football team going but also in sustaining the wellbeing of the community as a whole.

This story, which draws on the experience of one of the authors, is one that, anecdotally, holds true for many rural communities in Australia, and one that has occurred with increasing frequency over recent years. However, the importance of these examples of participation has grown recently, as many of the other institutions that sustained the cohesion of rural communities have gradually disappeared.

This paper draws on research conducted over a two year period in two small rural communities in western Victoria to highlight the role of physical activity and sport in sustaining both individual and community health and wellbeing in rural Australia.

Background

Health and wellbeing in rural Australia

By almost any measure, the health of rural Australians is poor in comparison with their urban counterparts^{2,3,4}. This has been documented extensively in recent years. However, if based on the World Health Organisation's definition of health - "a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"¹ - the extent to which rural Australians experience a lack of good health is even more starkly exposed.

Physical Activity and Health

As the recent report by AIHW on Australia's health points out² the role of physical activity in maintaining health has been well researched and is well documented⁶. For decades, Australians have been encouraged to participate in physical activity including sport, in recognition of its importance to health. Programs such as the 'Life, Be In It' campaigns, and the recent mandating of physical activity in primary school curricula are examples of this encouragement.

Sporting and physical recreation clubs are a key mechanism through which exercise is encouraged. The perception of Australia as a nation with a passion for sport is supported by figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), which indicate that 59% of Australian children aged between 5 and 14 years were involved in 'organised' sport outside of school hours in 2000⁷, and 59.4% of Australians aged 18 and over participate in sport or physical activity⁸, most through clubs, associations and other organisations. However, as well as facilitating physical activity, it appears that sport and physical recreation clubs and organisations may provide additional health benefits (both to individuals and to their communities) in the form of increased social capital.

Social Capital and Health

Though there are variations in the way it is defined, the concept of social capital is accepted, generally, as including the level of connectedness or civic engagement within a community, the trust members feel toward others, and the security they feel living within the community^{9,10,11,19}. Importantly for public health, recent research suggests that the notion of social capital may explain differences in mortality and morbidity within and between groups^{10,12}.

Community organisations are a key mechanism by which social capital is established and maintained in rural communities. However, declining populations in many small rural communities have contributed to the loss of many community organisations. In many communities, sporting clubs remain the last remnants of once vibrant social infrastructures¹³.

The Importance of Sport in Rural Communities

Historically sport has played an important role in Australian culture. In the first part of the twentieth century it characterised entertainment for many people, typically giving workers a focus for their leisure time on Saturday afternoons. Lynch & Veal¹⁴ suggest that, for many, participating or watching sport created a sense of identity and of communalism. Dempsey¹⁵ highlighted the importance of sport in his 17 year study of a Victorian rural community. His study found that sport and sporting clubs enabled all members of a community to be linked by a common bond - their participation within that club.

However, rationalisation and regionalisation of services and facilities recently affecting rural communities has resulted in the loss of core personnel¹⁶. This has undermined the organisational viability of many of the community social and civic organisations that are "key social spaces and community hubs in rural communities"¹⁷. Gerritsen¹⁸ highlights this decline: "Eventually the 'social capital'¹⁹ of the community is eroded. Local sporting teams can fold for want of a coach or enthusiastic parents, the local Lions Club can become moribund or completely dependent upon two or three people."

Nevertheless, Mahoney et al¹⁶ found in their initial study of two small Victorian rural communities that, at a time when other institutions and structures were disappearing, physical activity and organised sporting clubs remained, providing a focus within the communities and a sense of community cohesion. Moreover, Driscoll and Wood¹⁷, reporting on their study of six municipalities in South Western Victoria, stated that: "For communities experiencing comprehensive structural change, sport and recreation are perceived to be critical for town and community survival." Yet to date there is little published research linking rural communities, health and wellbeing and the role of physical activity and sport. The study on which this paper is based was undertaken to explore in more detail the effects of sporting clubs and organisations in the face of all the changes confronting small rural

communities.

The Study

The objectives of the study were:

- to ascertain the extent and nature of community involvement in sporting associations and physical activity groups within the selected communities;
- to assess residents' perceptions of the extent to which participation in sporting associations and physical activity groups contributes to individual and social wellbeing.

The study was undertaken in Hopetoun (population 670 people) and Peshurst (population 503 people) - two small rural communities situated some 5 hours and 3 hours respectively from Melbourne in the Southern Mallee and Wimmera regions of Victoria. The selection of these communities was based on Smailes' view that "strongly defined rural communities of identity are centred around small country towns with urban populations of 500-1500 people"²⁰.

Qualitative face-to-face interviews were used to collect data from 23 people in Peshurst and 20 in Hopetoun. Subjects were recruited from three different groups of people: leaders in each of the communities; organisers and managers of community sporting and physical activity groups; and participants in sporting organisations and physical activity groups. Recruitment for the participants' interviews was undertaken using a combination of self-selection and targeted selection to ensure representation across the age and activity/organisation range (based on demographic data and background research into the profile of organisations existing in each community). Among the questions asked were:

- which (if any) of the following sporting clubs are you involved in? (clubs existing in each community were identified through a review of literature including local newspapers, and through key informant interviews)
- in what capacity are you part of that organisation?
- in what ways (if any) has your involvement in this/these organisation/s changed in the past 10 years?
- why have these changes (if any) occurred?
- what (if anything) does sport/physical activity provide for you within this community?
- what positive influences are seen in the community that are a result of sporting organisations/clubs?
- are there any negative influences apparent to you in the local community as a result of sporting clubs/organisations? If yes, what are they?

Findings

In interpreting the results of the study, it is important to understand the context of these towns at the time the research was undertaken. The population of both towns has decreased by over 20% in the last twenty years. Both towns have lost many of the services that made them community hubs. Many of the young adults are going to larger centres for work or to study, and those who stay often face long-term unemployment^{3,16}. As a result, the proportion of the populations of the towns aged over 65 is 28.5% and 25% respectively.

The Health and Well-being Benefits of Sport in Hopetoun and Peshurst

In keeping with evidence from other rural and remote communities eg. Dempsey¹⁵, both this study and the more broadly based preliminary research undertaken by Mahoney et al.¹⁶ highlighted the centrality of sport, and particularly of the football club, for both of these towns. It seems clear that, as other institutions and organisations are lost in small rural communities, the relative importance (to the towns' survival and cohesion) of those that remain increases. Over 70% of the populations in both towns were said to have some playing or non-playing involvement with football. Paul Daffey, talking about the town of Yaapeet (another town in the Mallee), may well have been talking about the Hopetoun and Peshurst 'footy' culture when he said,

"It's getting harder and harder? It really is all we've got? On Thursday the whole district comes in for the chop night and on Saturday they go to the game. It really is the hub here."²¹

Nevertheless, the popularity and importance of other sports was also recognised, and it is worth noting that, despite the small population levels and in addition to the 70+% involvement with football, a wide range of other sporting organisations and activities is sustained in both communities. They include: basketball (Hopetoun only), cricket, netball, lawn bowls, golf, pony clubs, pigeon clubs, tennis, angling, and racing (Penshurst only). Other forms of physical activity, such as walking, jogging, swimming and cycling, were also undertaken on a regular basis by community members. Although this was undertaken alone in some cases, in many instances this physical activity was shared with friends.

In response to questions which explored the benefits for individuals and the communities as a result of participation in sport and physical activity (including club-related sport and physical activity), the theme consistently reiterated by community members from both towns was that sport and recreation were vital to the viability and sustainability of the towns (both socially and economically).

Respondents saw sporting activities as keeping the community together through providing a sense of unity, by being a social leveller, by fostering a sense of trust and contributing to social cohesion. These are all examples of sport building social capital.

A range of benefits for the social wellbeing of the communities arising from sport and physical activity were identified by the participants in this study. They included sport as a source of social interaction for the community (across barriers of age, length of residence, economic status, etc.), in the face of a rapidly changing environment. Sport was also seen as a means of fund raising for the community and support for community members who are experiencing difficult times (an example was given of community fund-raising organised through sporting clubs for a family who had suffered a house fire). Sporting organisations acted as a mentoring system for young children and adolescents, by demonstrating unity and solidarity and thereby creating greater respect for property and people.

Sport was also seen as a means of increasing community pride and loyalty, by creating 'healthy rivalry' between towns (the example was given of towns and their residents gaining a feeling of 'prestige' and importance when their team was in the football final). Sporting clubs and events provided a meeting place, and a means of uniting people across age groups. As one respondent noted,

'If we didn't have them [the clubs] it would be a dead town'. It is vital for the kids - there are hundreds of kids at Friday night basketball, it involves families - there's not much for children to do otherwise.. It keeps kids off the street.

The physical health benefits of exercise were widely recognised by respondents, with many expressing the view that sport and recreational pursuits were important because of their role in enhancing fitness and wellbeing. For many, involvement in sport and physical activity was the continuation of a lifetime habit. For example,

"I would miss it terribly if it wasn't there, my mother didn't play sport and she missed out on a lot... it's a way of giving and passing on of skills and knowledge."

However, the respondents considered that it was not just that these activities offered a way of keeping busy and physically active, but also that they provided an outlet for relieving frustration. In circumstances where many residents of small rural communities suffer increasing frustration due to their decline in access to services and a growing perception of being forgotten by decision-makers, the mental health benefits of sport and physical activity were also recognised. As one resident summarised,

"It's pretty sad really - if I didn't play sport I would go bonkers."

Others put it more positively, noting that sport offers people the opportunity of being 'involved', and that as a result of being involved and doing things, people feel good about themselves.

Sport was seen also as boosting the economy of both towns by bringing money into local organisations and businesses. Participants expressed the view that sport not only provides a boost to retail industries in the town (for example, in Hopetoun, the lake activities during summer, basketball, and the bowls tournament bring people and business to the town), but that it also provides a critical role for the local newspaper which is built almost entirely on sports results.

The changing face of Sport and Physical Activity in small rural communities

Despite the above positive benefits, the changing nature of sport in rural communities was also recognised. The biggest change reported was the loss of numbers across the board of those involved in sport, with players, spectators, and officials declining. Twenty years ago, there were over 100 male

members belonging to the bowls club in Hopetoun; in 1999 there was fewer than 30. A similar picture existed at the golf club, and at clubs in Peshurst. This lack of numbers was seen to impact everywhere: there are fewer spectators due to lower population base, most clubs struggle financially.

The diminishing population is also an ageing population that has necessitated fewer teams and the merging of clubs and associations. Respondents expressed the view that it has become increasingly difficult to get people to take on executive roles within the clubs. This is also caused by the loss of younger people to urban centres, insufficient replacements coming into the town and a lack of confidence and expertise held by those who do contribute. Therefore the burden falls on fewer and fewer very able people. As one resident put it,

"Every year it becomes more difficult to muster the numbers to keep the club going. Technology has enabled fewer people to work larger farms, forcing many families to cut the tie of generations and head for the towns."

This loss of personnel, however, not only affects club administration. A shortage of players can mean that people are encouraged to play beyond the 'normal' retirement age, or to play outside their age grouping or out of grade. This is consistent with other research that suggests this can result in a higher risk of injury to both younger and older members²².

It was clear from responses that the rural people in this study are notoriously innovative - when the easy options are not at hand, they tend to adapt and find solutions. Hopetoun Football Club offers an example of this creativity. To overcome the loss of young players to the metropolitan area due to study or work commitments, the club purchased motor vehicles, which it provides to the young footballers so that they are able to return home at weekends to play for the club.

Conclusion

From the findings of this small exploratory study, the evidence seems clear - physical activity and sport play a key part in sustaining the health and wellbeing (physical, mental and social) of residents of these two small rural communities. However, it is also clear that sustaining the organisations through which opportunities for sport and physical activity are provided is increasingly difficult in the face of broad political, economic and social change. Given the comparatively poor health of rural Australians already, any threat to the viability and sustainability of rural sporting organisations (which currently help to balance other negative influences on rural health) must be regarded as potentially disastrous. Further research is necessary to define how extensive this impact may be.

This study suggests that mechanisms need to be developed urgently to assist sporting clubs in small rural communities to sustain themselves, and through them, their communities. Based on the findings of this study, creative strategies (apart from 'bull-dozing' people into joining clubs) need to be devised particularly to address the shortfall in human and financial capital affecting rural communities and clubs. Failure to do this could ring the death knell not only for the clubs themselves, but also for the small rural communities in which they are located. The loss of such clubs (and the subsequent disintegration of the communities) may compound further the already relatively poor state of health of Australia's rural population.

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