

Rural women's involvement in developing midlife health resources

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INTRODUCTION

As the rural, regional and remote Australian population age, women will be highly represented in the older age groups. The appropriate management of menopause and other midlife issues has important implications for the delivery of health care and education.

Women (40–60) in rural areas face a specific set of difficulties relating to health and health care including limited access to services, limited choice of services, compromised privacy and limited access to up to date health related information.

Consultation and needs assessments conducted in 1999 and 2000 with rural and remote communities in Australia and in particular Victoria, indicate that information on menopause, hormone therapy, natural therapies, weight management, sexuality, depression and stress management were the main priorities of the 40–60 year old woman.

In response to this, The Jean Hailes Foundation is currently developing two national rural programs that are aiming to comprehensively address the educational needs of rural and remote health professionals and women who live in these communities:

- development of a Rural and Remote Health Professional's Resource Kit (entitled Midlife – a resource for health professionals)
- a CD-ROM (entitled Midlife – Understanding The Change) which has a particular focus on meeting the needs of isolated women.

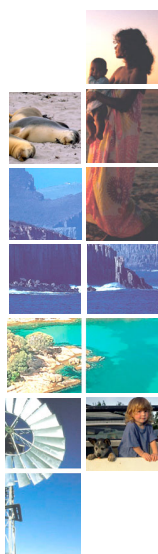
The CD-ROM is an integral part of the kit and has also evolved as a stand-alone resource, which can be used by women and their families.

The Jean Hailes Foundation Rural and Remote, Health Professional's Resource Project, encompassed a three-stage developmental process to assist communities to meet local needs in effective delivery of midlife education and promote community participation.

The project included:

- establishment of a rural steering committee to guide the project
- development of the educational kit including the CD-ROM
- a "train the trainer" workshop (that precedes use of the kit).

The training day is designed to increased use of the kit and is organised and facilitated by a local community worker.



Six training days have already been run across rural Victoria.

The kit is now complete and was launched in December 2002. The kit contains two manuals (one providing up-to-date information, one containing teaching strategies and facilitation skills, a CD-ROM and a video).

A key objective of this project was to involve local women living in rural and remote Victoria in the design and development of resources for health professionals and local women.

INVOLVEMENT OF LOCAL WOMEN

Thirteen rural focus groups and one metropolitan group were conducted in 2001 at key developmental phases. Initially the aim of the focus group was to collect feedback from women on the style and content of the kit. Then women were asked to share their experiences of midlife.

"Style and content" focus group

The first focus groups conducted were to gather information about the style and content of the resource kit.

The steering committee expressed interest in gathering this information and already had access to women's groups in their communities.

Questions were developed and given to each steering committee member. For example,

What key issues relevant to menopause and midlife, would you like to see addressed in the kit?

If you were to attend an information session on any of the issues you have identified, what works best for you in terms of presentation? (examples given)

Six focus groups were conducted with 10–15 women per group. All participants were paid \$20/hour plus catering was provided.

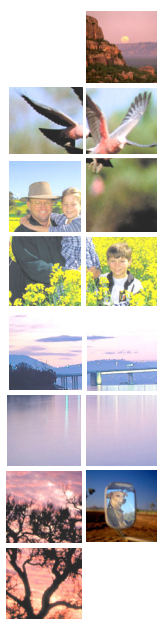
Overall the sense of regard and value the women felt by being included in the process was a common theme that emerged.

Following the positive response from the women and steering committee, plus the experience the women had of being able to express their needs, it was decided to conduct a second series of focus groups to collect women's stories and experiences of midlife and menopause.

Women's stories focus groups

Members of the steering committee conducted five focus groups.

The purpose of gathering this information was to gather "themes" and stories that could be used in the CD-ROM in a separate section called "women's stories". The information would also be used in the "strategies" manual in the kit as "discussion starters", case studies, etc.. for facilitation of groups.



We decided to consult a women's health writer to design the questions that would stimulate discussion and gather feedback for the resource kit.

The questions addressed four broad themes;

- signs and symptoms
- treatments and interventions
- health care providers
- the meaning of menopause.

The initial feedback on the style and content was relatively straightforward to interpret and utilise. The collated material was presented at a steering committee meeting, prioritised and then incorporated.

The women's stories feedback was full of qualitative material and wonderful quotes and experiences. The women's health writer collated all the information for the project from hard copy and audiotapes material and emerging themes were developed.

CONCLUSION

A comprehensive resource kit for health professionals working in rural and remote communities and a CD-ROM focusing on health issues at midlife were developed and completed by The Jean Hailes Foundation in July 2002.

The women's stories collected through this process have become a significant component of both resources. The Foundation believes that both the style and content of the resources reflects the expectations of the women involved in the focus groups.

150 women throughout rural Victoria have experienced the process of consumer consultation. They have acknowledged the benefits for them and expressed the desire to continue to participate in the same way in future projects.

We believe involvement of women in resource development will ultimately contribute to sustainability and community ownership in the delivery of effective education for women at midlife.

To finish I would like to share with you a quote from the rural steering committee;

As part of the Steering Committee, I facilitated two focus groups of local women, to find out what menopause meant to them, what they would like to know and how they would like to receive that knowledge. The women aged from 40-70 loved being part of the group and were very empowered by the whole process. They reported learning much of value and felt very privileged to be involved and valued enough to be paid a nominal amount for their time and travel and treated to a gourmet lunch at each session!

