

Social and community links – drivers of healthy and active ageing

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Abstract

Australia's population, like that of other developed nations, is ageing. Strong social and community connections in later life are associated with wellness and functionality, which can lead to an overall improvement in quality of life (Dionigi & Lyons, 2010). The prevalence and impact of social isolation and loneliness in regional areas may be more dramatic than in metropolitan areas, and older people in particular, typically face different barriers to accessing services in regional areas compared with major cities. The Ability Links program has been successful in supporting people with disability and their carers by improving access to services and developing networks within the local community. Similarly, this project seeks to connect community organisations and seniors, reduce barriers to social participation in order to maintain and improve the social and community links contributing to healthy and active ageing. The end result provides a framework for developing a better support mechanism for promoting the benefits of social and community networking for older people in regional Australia, indirectly resulting in decreased dependency on the health care system.

Introduction

Social interaction is important to the wellbeing of older people (Tavel, 2008; Victor & Bowling, 2012) and the detrimental effects of loneliness on wellbeing in older people may manifest as cardiovascular disease, depressive symptoms and mortality (Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2010; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Shankar, McMunn, Banks, & Steptoe, 2011). Older people face barriers to maintaining social and community links, which can lead to social isolation and a downward spiral in wellbeing (Bernoth et al., 2012). These barriers are magnified in regional Australia (Davis & Bartlett, 2008; Wallace, 2015; Winterton & Warburton, 2012).

The Ability Links NSW is an initiative addressing the needs of people with disabilities by increasing connectivity between community organisations and individuals. Dedicated personnel, known as Linkers, act as a mechanism for increasing the connectivity of isolated, disabled Australians (Wallace, 2015). These Linkers connect individuals to relevant organisations, improving overall community participation, thus positively impacting the quality of life of people with disabilities and raising social capital. Additionally, participants with disabilities gained confidence to self-facilitate further participation, leading to increased self-worth and engagement with a wide range of services (Wallace, 2015).

Therefore, the current project extends the model of the Ability Links program to seniors in regional Australia, with the aim to enhance healthy ageing outcomes for these people. This ongoing project examines the challenges and barriers to connectivity from the perspective of seniors and the community organisations involved, and seek to establish a model for using Linkers to develop social interaction.

This project initiated by CareWest includes a crucial collaboration with Charles Sturt University (CSU), which provides a broad knowledge base and expertise. The project links mainstream community service organisations to residents of the Orange and Griffith communities in New South Wales, Australia. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships amongst the stakeholders.

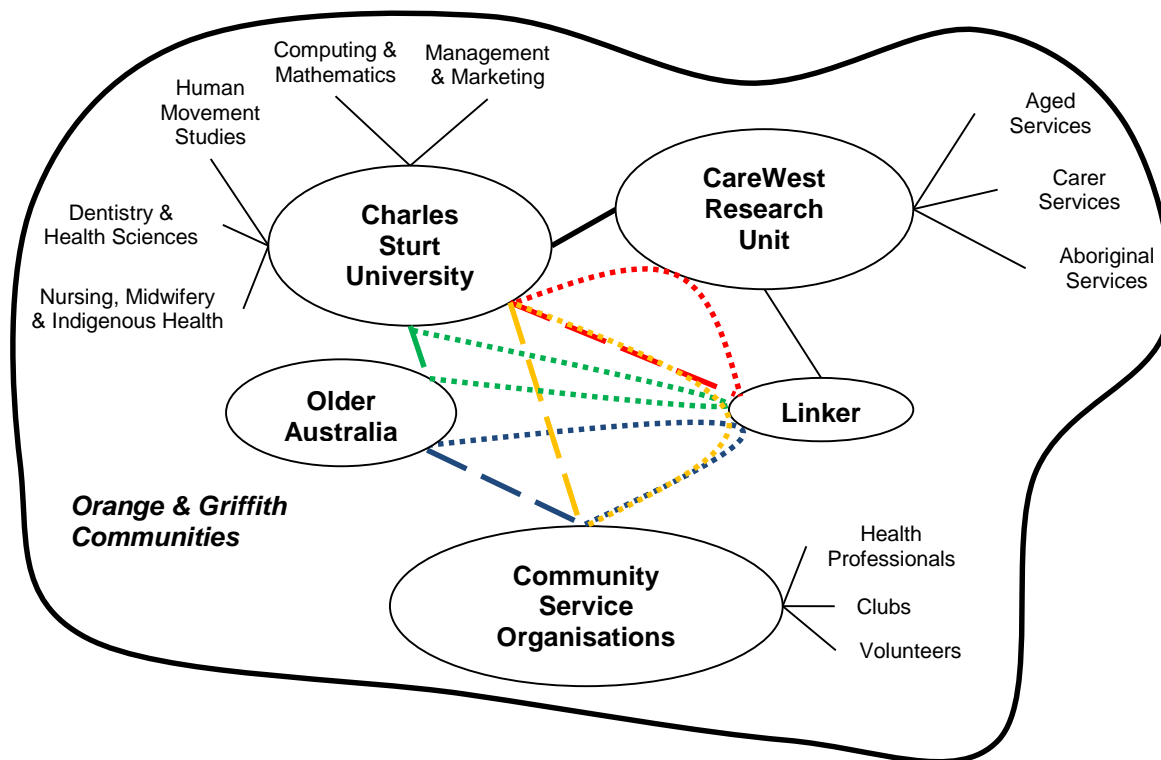


Figure 1. Direct and indirect linkages to increase community social capital and improve quality of life for older people living in regional Australia. Solid black lines indicate existing links. Dotted coloured lines indicate indirect links between stakeholders resulting in direct relationships indicated by dashed coloured lines.

The Role of the Linker

The Linker begins with establishing a relationship with seniors to make a direct assessment of their social and community needs, and obtain feedback on community service organisations that resonate with them. To meet their needs, the Linker connects the appropriate community organisation to the individual. The rapport between the Linker and the community organisation facilitates the individual's access to these organisations. The collaboration between the Linker and the organisation explores modifications to existing programs so that the needs of the older individuals are met and community connections are established.

Interventions

The Linkers will oversee trial interventions during the study. These can include the development of educational resources and exercise programs, promoting the benefits of social and community support, and using technology to improve connectedness to assist individuals and organisations break down the barriers that lead to social isolation.

One intervention in Orange equips participants with iPads and peer training to attempt overcoming the social isolation commonly associated with health problems (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010), by keeping participants connected, during good and bad health situations, with each other, community organisations and wider networks of family and friends. Significant research (Chodzko-Zajko, Schwingel, & Chae Hee Park, 2009) has shown that social interaction is a key factor in healthy ageing, and that mobility is a precursor to social interaction. Indeed, research has shown that when older people are able to access and experience university-run exercise programs, they feel connected to the university and other people in their local community (Dionigi & Lyons, 2010).

Organisations

Mainstream community organisations such as senior citizen's clubs, RSLs, sporting clubs, and medical services will be identified. The Linker will also identify a person from each community organisation who will function as a volunteer Linker to augment the efforts of the Linker. Together, the Linkers will identify and address barriers to accessing the services provided by these organisations, to increase their engagement with individuals in the community.

Older regional participants

The success of this initiative is dependent on the extent to which the individuals are comfortable with articulating their personal, social and community goals. For this reason, a rapport between the Linker and each individual will be built through frequent communication to best identify the approach needed to connect these individuals to their community. This communication seeks to be open, honest, and centred on the individual to gain trust in order

to best identify needs and create the most appropriate links between each person and the relevant organisation.

The benefits and challenges of using a Linker to increase community connectedness are being evaluated by CSU. The mixed method evaluation includes quantitative surveys, self-report diaries and qualitative interviews. A subset of the participants will also undergo an oral examination to establish the link between oral health and overall wellbeing, with the aim of using oral health status as a screening tool to identify physical health status. A separate subset of participants will undergo a battery of functional performance test, e.g., 30-s sit-to-stand performance, to gauge capacity to perform activities of daily living, providing an indication of the ability to live independently.

Conclusions

Given the ongoing problem of social isolation among people with disabilities and older Australians, Linkers programs have been a way of increasing connectivity in people with disabilities with their communities (Wallace, 2015). However, this program has yet to be applied to older people in regional Australia.

The central focus of this ongoing project, due for completion in 2017, is on the person and their needs, so that the most appropriate services are provided. There is potential for the Linker to have a positive impact on the social and community connections between older Australians and relevant organisations in regional Australia (World Health Organisation, 2002).

This multi-disciplinary team provides an evidence base to demonstrate the benefits and challenges of using Linkers to assist in establishing social and community connections for seniors in regional Australia. The team will examine the benefits and challenges experienced by individuals, carers, community organisations and the communities overall, through a wide range of measures. The end goal is a framework for developing a better support mechanism, promoting the benefits of social and community networking for seniors in regional Australia, prolonging independent living with potential to decrease avoidable presentation within the health care system.

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