



CSF-Canberra Supporting Families in mental illness  
Newsletter of

**Canberra Schizophrenia Fellowship**

**A Member of the Mental Illness Fellowship Australia**

PO Box 6216, O'Connor ACT 2602. PH: 6205 1349

This newsletter is sponsored by the Canberra Southern Cross Club

**Volume 9 Number 3**

**April 04**

### ***PRESIDENT'S REPORT***

Mental health issues have been in the media in the last month, particularly since CSF convened the forum at the Legislative Assembly on 26 February. About 12 people attended the meeting with Dr Tony Sherbon, CEO of ACT Health, with representatives of ACT Health also attending.

We were satisfied that our concerns were heard, and Dr Sherbon will consult with the department and meet with us again on Tuesday 13 April. He admitted that ACT Mental Health could only do so much, and that we would have to continue to lobby.

Also as a result of media reports, cabinet did not pass the ACT Mental Health Strategic & Action Plan. An inter-departmental committee, commissioned by the Chief Minister, was formed to report into the care and custody of people with mental health issues who come into contact with the criminal justice system. The committee reported to him mid-March and the Government is considering its response.

Opposition Leader Brendan Smyth launched the Liberal Mental Health Policy on March 29. The policy addresses the concerns of the community and

### **PUBLIC MEETING**

**Wednesday**

**14 April 04**

**at 5.30pm**

**HELENIC CLUB**

**Matilda Street**

**Woden**

***Speaker:***

**Amanda Raward  
from ACTCOSS**

***Subject:***

**Mental Health Community  
Coalition**

**Correction** The date for the April meeting is 14 April 04, not the 7 April as previously advised in the March newsletter.

another step in a positive direction of supporting people coming before the courts with the drug and alcohol worker and Corrective Services staff central to establishing a cross-communication between different areas.

We are pleased to have received funding from the Canberra Community Foundation for cinema advertising. Sincere thanks to member Kerrin Madden who devised the concept and took the digital shots, and her son Julian and his friends who were the subjects. The screening will commence on Thursday 15 April for eight weeks, then four weeks during September/October at Hoyts Belconnen, Woden and Tuggeranong, and Greater Union Civic and Manuka. The target audience is the 17 to 24 year old among whom we hope to raise awareness of schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia Awareness Week is the 17 to 21 May. Eli-Lilly has funded the well-renowned US author of *I'm not sick, I don't need help*, Xavier Amador, to visit Australia. He will be in Canberra Tuesday 16 and Wednesday 17, you will be advised when we have arranged a venue to hear him speak.

**Annette Atherton**

### **ADVANCE NOTICE PUBLIC MEETING**

**Wednesday**

**12 May 04**

**at 5.30 pm**

**HELENIC CLUB**

**Matilda Street**

**Woden**

***Speaker & Subject:***

*To be advised*

promises to increase mental health funding over the next four years, if elected to government in October.

The following day, Minister for Health, Simon Corbell, met with Chief Magistrate Ron Cahill and the forensic court liaison officer now co-located at the ACT Magistrates Court. This is

## Dealing with The Voices

Hearing voices is a common side-effect of schizophrenia that can have a devastating and sometimes more disabling impact on a person's life and the lives of carers than the illness itself. While medication has traditionally been used by psychiatrists to ameliorate the most distressing aspects of "the voices", they rarely disappear altogether. Sufferers may have to learn how to 'live' with them on a recurring basis. The good news is that many people who hear voices are doing just that, and, as a result, are forging new identities and more positive ways of living.

Eleven years ago in Britain, a group of people with schizophrenia decided they would take the matter into their own hands by helping each other devise ways of dealing with the voices in practical - and often very imaginative - ways.

*The Hearing Voices Network was the result.*

The network, which holds regular meetings and provides phone support and information, quickly grew to eight support groups with 350 members. In 2003 this had grown to 130 support groups with 1300 members across the country, with people in the US, Europe and Australia accessing the network by phone and e-mail. Specialist groups have now been established for women, Cantonese speakers, and gay and lesbian people.

An average phone call can last from 20 to 90 minutes with support provided by people who themselves hear voices. In this way they are able to advise callers on coping strategies and share specific management techniques on how they deal with the voices. This can range from using a Walkman to listen to music, talking back and taking control, or telling the

voices you "don't have time to listen right now".

Importantly, the approach taken by the network does not dismiss or deny the reality of the person's experience.

At the Fellowship's public meeting in March, committee member Professor Paul Morrison, mental health nurse and psychologist, led discussion on how the groups work, with the idea that this was something that might take off in Australia.

He said that the impact of the network has been to change the way we understand the pathological base of mental illness. Even among professionals a new way of viewing the experience of voice-hearing is emerging, with psychiatrists and psychologists now referring voice hearers to these groups.

It has also shown that the experience of hearing voices does not have to be negative and that it is possible to live meaningful and satisfying lives and hear voices at the same time.

The two main websites of the Hearing Voices Network are: [www.hearing-voices.org.uk](http://www.hearing-voices.org.uk) and [www.madpride.org.uk](http://www.madpride.org.uk)

The work of the Network was extensively covered in a number of articles published in *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* 2003 No.3 published by the Dulwich Centre, Adelaide, South Australia. The website of the Dulwich Centre is [www.dulwichcentre.com](http://www.dulwichcentre.com)

## Prenatal maternal health linked to schizophrenia in offspring

Schizophrenia may be a "partly preventable" disease in 20 years if high lead levels and infection from both 'flu and rubella can be prevented in pregnant women.

These are the three major indications of increased risk – sometimes three-fold – of a child exposed to lead and 'flu and rubella viruses *in utero* developing schizophrenia later in life, according to research findings presented at the annual conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Seattle earlier this year.

The researchers, at New York's Columbia University, involved Dr Mark Opler in the university's Department of Psychiatry and Dr Ezra Susser, Professor of Epidemiology and Psychiatry.

Their interest is in whether schizophrenia has origins in early life experiences, even before birth, and whether there are factors that could disrupt brain developments in that early time, but would not manifest as an actual psychiatric or mental disorder until youth or adulthood, which is when schizophrenia has its onset.

In an interview with Dr Norman Swan, presenter of *The Health Report* on ABC Radio National, the researchers described how data from blood samples from pregnant women in Oakland, California, collected at every pre-natal visit, were used in relation to a population sample of 20,000 people born in the same city between 1959 and 1967.

The results showed that a high lead level in the period of mid-gestation resulted "in about a two-fold increased risk of having schizophrenia" in later life, with every indication that the risk is dose-related.

The researchers suspect that the reason is related to apoptosis, or programmed cell death, which is a natural occurrence. However, if too much cell death occurs at the wrong time (lead can be a cause of programmed cell death) it can result in disturbed brain development.

Car fumes from leaded petrol

appear to have been the main source of the lead levels found in the pregnant women in the Oakland study.

On the question of the World Health Organisation's position on the incidence of schizophrenia being consistent throughout the world, Dr Susser's findings appear to challenge the WHO position, based on the work of Dr Norman Sartorius, former head of WHO Mental Health.

According to Dr Susser, all the sites around the world cited in the WHO study, with the exception of one site, were highly industrialised countries. The only site examined in a developing country was Chandigar, India, built after independence, where in some analyses there appears to be a higher rate of schizophrenia and in others, about the same rate as in industrialised countries.

"You can't make a global statement ... about one site," said Dr Susser. "So, essentially, we don't know [about consistency of incidence]"

Since the introduction of unleaded petrol in the United States, it could be another 20 years before any significant decline in schizophrenia linked with high pre-natal lead levels from petrol is recorded.

### **Viruses**

On the subject of other toxins during pregnancy which may be implicated in the later development of schizophrenia in offspring, Dr Susser reported two direct findings – one previously published and one that's in press - neither of them to do with "the winter conception" theory of schizophrenia.

Among a cohort of children born with congenital rubella and then examined in adulthood there was "a very large proportion" with psychotic disorders. Because this is "probably the most direct study yet of a pre-natal exposure [to

rubella] in schizophrenia", Dr Susser expressed his confidence in that finding, namely "that pre-natal rubella can result in schizophrenia in the offspring".

The second study, looking at the same cohort of pregnant women in Oakland, California, who were examined for lead levels, found that of those women who had evidence of exposure to influenza in the first half of pregnancy, their offspring had about a three-fold increased risk of schizophrenia.

Although influenza during pregnancy has, for some years, been suspected of being linked with schizophrenia, according to Dr Susser, previous studies, which variously found both for and against, had used "very crude approaches" because they did not have "a fine measure" of prenatal influenza exposure.

In the Oakland population the researchers did have the "fine measure" needed i.e. antibodies in the mothers' serum samples at different stages of pregnancy, and it is on this evidence that their conclusion on the three-fold risk is based.

### **Folic acid**

Inadequate folate levels during pregnancy and the risk of schizophrenia in offspring is another area that the two researchers are looking at. Although lack of sufficient folate during pregnancy has been established as a cause of spina bifida in offspring, no conclusions have yet been reached about the development of schizophrenia. The researchers are using the same serum samples from the same cohort of Oakland women in this work.

According to Dr Susser, a previous finding from a study of the Dutch famine at the end of WWII showed that fetuses exposed to maternal starvation in early gestation had a two-fold increased risk of schizophrenia

compared with those who were not exposed. It was this that has made them think of folate deprivation.

With the genetic contribution to the development of schizophrenia said to be as high as 70 per cent, Dr Opler said the best way he could describe the findings on the connection between lead and viruses was to describe it as a gene/environment interaction.

"Certain genes, and gene productions, will greatly alter an individual organism's response to lead poisoning," he said, agreeing with interviewer Norman Swan, that for schizophrenia to become "partly preventable" in 20 years it would be necessary to identify those at genetic risk - and remove the toxins.

*To access the ABC Health Report, the web address is [www.abc.net.au/rn](http://www.abc.net.au/rn) and follow the prompts to The Health Report. This article was based on a lengthy interview broadcast on 8 March 2004. The full transcript contains references to the relevant journals in which the research was published.*

## Paths of Healing

This is the title of an easy-to-read collection of discharge information for consumers and carers prepared by Linette Bone and Linda Rosey and launched in mid-March by ACT Health Minister Simon Corbell.

It has useful advice, by a consumer, on how people who have just come out of hospital can prevent a relapse and lists Canberra's self-help and support groups.

It also sets out clearly:

- \* the rights and responsibilities of consumers, carers and Mental Health ACT;

- \* guiding principles and helpful hints for handling distressing symptoms and behaviour.

*Paths of Healing* is published by ACT Health and is available at many outlets including psychiatric wards, the Mental Health Foundation office in Phillip, and Carers ACT in Belconnen.

## Lifeline's Tool Kit for Carers

Lifeline's *Just Ask* is an Australia-wide mental health information service which has recently launched a series of 'Tool kits' in clear English with practical tips and self-help strategies to cope with a number of mental health issues affecting both consumers and carers.

Titles available include *Beating the Blues*, *Beating Panic Attacks*, *Living with children with ADHD*, *Carers of people with Mental Illness*, and, *Aboriginal Depression*.

The six-page *Tool Kit for Carers of People with Mental Illness* deals with common feelings of guilt, shame, fear, anger and frustration, sadness and love and how to understand what is happening by understanding the illness, knowing about treatment options and medications, and the mental health system and how it works.

Lifeline's *Just Ask* service is *not* a counselling service. However, it provides information and referral for people with mental health problems, and to friends, relatives and others who want to know how to help.

Callers are told about relevant local services, as well as books, support groups and web sites such as that of SANE Australia [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org) and Carers Australia [www.carersaustralia.com.au](http://www.carersaustralia.com.au)

The *Just Ask* website is [www.justask.org.au](http://www.justask.org.au) and email address is [justask@lifeline.org.au](mailto:justask@lifeline.org.au)

Copies of the Mental Health Tool Kit (and any others) are available free. Ring the freecall number 1300 13 11 14 between 9 am and 5 pm Monday to Friday or leave a message out of hours. The *Just Ask* service is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing under the National Mental Health Strategy.

Lifeline's 24-hour counselling service number is 13 11 14.

## Mental Illness and Caring

A course of six weekly sessions for relatives and friends of people with a mental illness begins on 28 April at the Belconnen Community Centre.

The course covers information about mental illness, the work of Mental Health ACT, community supports, managing difficult situations, communication, handling stress, looking after yourself and balancing everyone's needs.

The course also provides participants with an opportunity to better understand and deal with issues that arise with mental illness, and to talk with other people in similar situations.

The course is being provided by the Department of Human Services at the Canberra Institute of Technology. It is free and refreshments will be provided.

The course facilitator is Jenny Thompson, a community psychologist and an experienced Skills for Carers trainer.

**Time and Place:**  
Wednesdays 10 am -12 noon from 28 April to 2 June, inclusive, in Room 3, Belconnen Community Centre, corner of Swanson Circuit and Chandler Street, Belconnen.

For more information or to register phone Skills for Carers on 6207 4811 or email [karen.noble@cit.act.edu.au](mailto:karen.noble@cit.act.edu.au)

they have developed to help their recovery.

Steve works for Mental Health ACT as the Comorbidity/Dual Diagnosis workers and has met many people who are dealing with the issues of substance use in relation to their recovery.

*The dates are:*

**Tuesday 6 April 3 - 4 pm**

**Tuesday 23 April 1 - 2 pm**

**Tuesday 20 April 3 - 4 pm**

**Tuesday 27 April 3 - 4pm**

*This is how you get to The Rainbow:* By bus from Civic, Nos 36 and 30 leave every 10 minutes. From Belconnen, Bus No. 48 from Belconnen Interchange. The Rainbow is at H Block, Canberra Technology Park, Phillip Avenue Watson ACT.

*If you don't know The Rainbow, it's a place for all mental health consumers to go and meet new people, learn new skills (computer, internet, art and craft, gardening and writing) or simply relax in a safe, friendly and respectful environment. There's a pool table, as well as board games, table tennis, relaxation classes, regular excursions and trips, cooking etc. It's free - and very popular. For more information about The Rainbow telephone 6242 6575.*

## Recovery and Substance Use Group

If you are recovering from a mental illness and you want to know more about how your substance use affects your recovery, then this is the group for you.

Steve Hartnett will be running a series of four groups at The Rainbow to enable people to share their experience and the strategies