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Doing things for others with others: How the Berry Men's Shed promotes social participation of older men and social capital in a rural community

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Introduction

The men's shed program in Australia is community-based and occupation-focused. Men's sheds provide male friendly spaces for men to participate in personally meaningful occupations and enjoy each other's company. Most participants are older men retired from paid employment. Although throughout Australia there is a diverse range of sheds providing opportunity for engagement in various occupations, the numerous outcomes and benefits of participation in the different sheds are relatively similar.

Objectives

The aim of this presentation is to advocate for community-based, occupation-focused programs as a means of promoting social participation of a group of men that has traditionally been difficult to engage in community activities and risk being isolated. The Berry Men's Shed in a rural community in NSW, Australia, is used as an exemplar to illustrate how it promotes social participation of older men through a complex mix of transactions that are occupational, environmental and psycho-social in nature.

Description

The presentation begins with an overview of the history of community men's sheds in Australia and a synthesis of research into the outcomes and benefits for the participants. Following a description of the Berry Men's Shed, there will be discussion of its program from an occupational perspective with a focus on the different transactions that occur both within and outside the shed.

Discussion

The recent proliferation throughout Australia of community-based sheds for older men is astonishing and demonstrates the individual and community benefits when older men gather together to do what they enjoy and to share their skills.

Conclusion

The key message of this presentation for practitioners, academics and policy makers throughout the world is the potential of doing things together for other people. Community-based, occupation-focused projects warrant support as a means of not only promoting social participation but for also enhancing community development through increasing social capital.

Contribution to OT

The Australian model of the men's shed program could be easily adapted by occupational therapists in other cultures to promote social participation of older men and enhance community development.