



Sheds for Sustainable Development Project: Men's Sheds as an alternative route for male health engagement.

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Summary of key messages:

Men's Sheds have been identified as a way for men to take part in positive health promoting behaviours and access support and in an informal 'male friendly' environment. Especially for those less likely to access formal health services such as GPs or mental health services. This briefing outlines emerging findings from in-depth interviews with 62 members of 5 Men's Sheds in Scotland, exploring the ways in which Men's Sheds are impacting on health and wellbeing behaviours. Our findings suggest that in taking part in Shed activities members increased their health seeking behaviours, increased resilience and ability to deal with existing illness, and improved their ability to deal with different forms of illness. However, Men's Sheds may be unable to offer a replacement service to more formal healthcare due to their characteristic factors, such as the ageing demographic of members. For this reason, policymakers and health practitioners must find novel ways to work in partnership with and support Men's Sheds.

1. Background

Research has found that men are more likely to face illness, take part in risky behaviours, and have a lower life expectancy than women. In particular, men are more prone to poor mental health and higher suicide rates, heart disease and strokes. However, men are less likely to access formal healthcare due to a lack of 'male friendly' services, and common views that see men as strong and resilient, making them a hard to reach group for preventative healthcare. Men's Sheds have been identified as a potential alternative space for men to take part in positive health behaviours in an informal and relaxed environment. They provide opportunities for men to do practical and social activities that encourage social support and interaction with other men.

Although studies have shown the health and wellbeing benefits of Men's Sheds on their users, very little is known about the specific ways that sheds might promote positive health behaviours and attitudes in men. Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, the Sheds for Sustainable Development Project set out to fill in this gap.

2. Methods

In-depth interviews took place with 62 Men's Shed members from across 5 Scottish Sheds. The Sheds that took part in the study were from different demographic and geographical areas, and at different stages of development to represent a variety of Sheds. The findings are based on self-reported changes in health behaviours from the participating in this study individuals.

3. Findings

The average age of the Shed members studied was 67 years old, and although participants as young as 24 years old were interviewed, those attending the Sheds were mainly older and retired. Findings suggest that in providing opportunities to take part in both practical and social activities, and gain social support from others in a 'male friendly' environment, the health behaviours of shed users was impacted in the following ways:

- **Increasing men's health seeking behaviour (e.g. reading up on health issues, improving diet and exercise, and decreasing heavy alcohol use):**
 - Through increased opportunities for men to talk to each other men about their experiences of illness.
 - Through visits from health workers delivering talks on physical and mental health issues.
 - Through an increased motivation to continue to be able to take part in practical shed activities that requires a level of mobility and energy.

- **Improving men's resilience and ability to deal with illness (e.g. managing stress or discomfort):**
 - Through taking part in practical shed activities that provide a distraction/escape from illness (i.e. pain, worry).
 - Through speaking to other men about their experiences of similar physical or mental illness or health concerns and seeing/hearing how they have coped.

- **Improving men's ability to deal with different forms of illness (e.g. having less reliance on formal health visits and medications):**
 - Through increased opportunities to take part in physical activity that improved mobility and strength.
 - From consistent support and encouragement from shed members both inside and outside of the shed to overcome physical and mental illness (i.e. home visits).
 - Through the sharing of experiences with other men who had recovered from or were managing similar illness and not feeling alone.

Our findings suggest that although the health behaviours of Men's Shed users improved, these organisations are unable to offer replacement health care or more formal services due to the following reasons:

- **They attract mainly older members,** often with their own health issues related to ageing or long term disability, that limit their ability or willingness to look after others.

- **The ‘ethos’ of Men’s Sheds** as an informal space created, ran and owned ‘by the men for the men’ that emphasised freedom from responsibility and obligation to perform specific tasks (i.e. the care of others).
- **The inability of Men’s Sheds to deal with complex health needs** of members, which was often outside of their remit or responsibility for care (i.e. men with dementia, serious mental health issues, limited mobility). This has implications for the willingness and capability of members to take on individuals referred by health and social care services.
- **The provision of a safe, suitable environment accessible to all** was a difficult task for sheds, especially the difficulty in acquiring premises from public authorities, in a location that is accessible for all, and ensuring a safe environment for those with more challenging health concerns (i.e. safe use of machinery).

4. Implications

Our emerging findings suggest that in providing opportunities for men to take part in practical and social activities, and access social support from other men, Men’s Sheds can positively impact on the health behaviours of their members. Unlike other community based organisations, Sheds offer a space where men can access health information and advice from other members, and external health visitors, in their own ‘male friendly’ way. This is important for engaging with ‘hard to reach’ men who are less likely to access GPs and other formal health services. However, what our findings suggest is that Men’s Sheds are limited in their ability and willingness to become a fully alternative route to formal healthcare due to their ethos and ageing/ retired members.

Taking this into consideration, it is suggested that Men’s Sheds could offer a complementary ad hoc health model, rather than be a replacement service. Formalising and professionalising Men’s Sheds may run counter to their aims and ethos. For this reason, both policymakers and health care practitioners need to find new ways to work in partnership with such organisations to accommodate the health needs of men, whilst offering them relevant support.

For more information on the Sheds for Sustainable Development Project please contact Professor Artur Steiner, Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health, Glasgow Caledonian University E: Artur.Steiner@gcu.ac.uk