

## CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

### Empowering the local community through a flexible education program

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Andrea Ness, Julie Lew, Erin Poznachowski, Amanda McOrmond

Merri Health Melbourne, Australia

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Merri Health is a not-for-profit community health organisation with a focus on creating healthy, connected communities for people at every age and stage of life across northern metropolitan Melbourne and into the Hume region.

Data shows Moreland has higher than average prevalence of many chronic diseases: in 2011, it was named a 'diabetes hotspot' by Diabetes Australia after diagnoses increased by 161% between 2006 and 2011.

The municipality has significantly higher rates of cardiovascular disease than the Victorian average and also has high proportions of overweight and obese residents, with a significant proportion of the community not undertaking adequate physical exercise.<sup>1</sup>

As a disadvantaged municipality,<sup>2</sup> the associated negative health effects of chronic health issues, obesity, poor food choices, and engagement with unhealthy behaviours represent an important need for intervention.

A key goal of Merri Health is to develop initiatives that provide educational tools to develop healthy habits and long-term health maintenance strategies to create healthy communities.

In 2012, we partnered with Moreland Council to deliver HEAL – a physical activity and lifestyle education program targeting people with or at risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Through an 8-week lifestyle modification program, the project addresses the high prevalence of chronic disease in the area by supporting people to develop lifelong healthy eating and exercise practices. Our key objectives include empowering participants with health knowledge and improving their overall health and wellbeing.

The initiative helps disadvantaged communities access tools and supports to empower them to improve and manage their own health. To promote greater access, our session fee of \$7.50 can be reduced or waived. We also run a group specifically for women only to encourage greater participation of Muslim women.

We've involved community and other stakeholders by meeting regularly with the Healthy Communities Initiative Project Manager at Moreland Council during implementation, connecting with GPs and community groups to increase awareness and boost referral whilst seeking ongoing feedback from participants to inform continuous improvement.

In the first 3 years, HEAL participants: decreased waist circumference by 1.32% ,increased physical activity by 24.95% per week, decreased average daily sitting by 19.7%, increased daily vegetable servings by 24% and increased qualitative measures on healthy lifestyle knowledge and confidence

Although healthy lifestyle programs may be common to many healthcare providers, our initiative takes an innovative approach by adapting an established model to the unique needs of our community. By considering cultural sensitivities, individualised engagement strategies, and opportunities to connect with people from disadvantaged groups, we've been able to flexibly support our community and demonstrate change in an at-risk population.

Our data demonstrates excellence in primary prevention through improved outcomes across several key domains, which have been achieved by matching our program to the needs of our community. Through flexible delivery, we've engaged clients from diverse backgrounds and with other challenges such as socio-economic disadvantage, depression, and unemployment.

**References:**

- 1- Moreland Council's Health and Wellbeing Plan, 2013.
- 2- SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage, 2011, reported in Moreland Council's Health and Wellbeing Plan, 2013.

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**Keywords:** community; disadvantaged; education; flexible; support

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