

All About Health and Disability: A workplace obesity prevention initiative

Brunswick Industries Association & Merri Community Health Services

Background:

- The CEO of Brunswick Industries Association (BIA, a supported workplace for people with disabilities), contacted Merri Community Health Services (MCHS), expressing concern about the level of obesity and general ill health of BIA employees. Assistance was requested to help improve physical and mental health and wellbeing of BIA employees.
- 60 men and women (aged 19-62 yrs) are employed at BIA. All experience physical and mental disabilities with varying levels of independence.
- This vulnerable population suffer from multiple and often undetected health problems.

Aims:

- To use a health promoting framework and improve the lifestyle of BIA employees by reducing the risks from obesity and inactivity (ie diabetes and cardiovascular disease).
- To increase participation and choice around physical activity and healthy eating options.

Program:

Physical Activity: 30 minute modified exercise program twice per week before work. Incentives given to those employees who achieve milestones ie 10, 20, 30 sessions. Developed by a physiotherapist and conducted by YMCA.

Nutrition: two sessions per week over six weeks. Aims to provide information on requirements for a healthy lunch, learning how to make lunch, then progressing to bringing their own lunch by the last week. Developed by a Dietician and assisted by a volunteer.

Health Assessments: "at risk" clients attend a monthly workplace clinic. Health assessment conducted by MCHS Community Nurse, including referrals to local health professionals and liaison with family members/carers.

Outcomes:

Physical Activity Program

- To date there are consistently 9 employees involved in physical activity sessions. One employee has completed 30 sessions.
- YMCA have agreed to continue these sessions.
- A workplace pedometer challenge has commenced, and an additional hydrotherapy class.

Nutrition Program

- Six 6 week nutrition sessions have been completed.
- An Occupational Therapist modified utensils when employees had difficulty making lunch.
- Employees have developed skills to actively prepare their own food at home and bring healthy homemade lunches to work.

Health Assessments

- 25 (42%) employees attend monthly health clinics for ongoing assessment and service coordination.
- High rates of hypertension and obesity detected.
- Additional issues faced by employees: insecure housing, low fixed income from disability benefit, long-term financial insecurity, legal guardianship issues, caring roles for elderly relatives, retirement planning, physical and emotional trauma from abuse.

Discussion:

- The workplace initiatives at BIA have increased physical activity, improved eating habits and enhanced independence among employees.
- Workplace health assessments uncovered welfare issues as well as physical health issues. Referral to appropriate services occurred and issues are continuing to be managed.
- An unexpected result was the self-reported improvement in mental wellbeing due to regular participation in the physical activity sessions.
- The tailored physical activity sessions have provided an opportunity for the employees to try new activities in a supportive environment and gain self-confidence in mastering new skills.
- YMCA have committed to continuing the exercise sessions, ensuring the sustainability of the program. Volunteers are being supported to continue the nutrition program.
- The workplace setting enabled changes in physical activity and nutrition to become part of a daily routine, which is important for this population group.
- Partnerships between BIA, MCHS and local agencies have strengthened as a result of service coordination.

Recommendations:

- Future programs should encourage managerial staff to participate.
- Workplace health promotion for people with disabilities should be holistic and address underlying welfare issues instead of a sole focus on obesity and chronic illness.
- Government agencies should provide incentives for modified programs and equipment in supported workplaces.



Lindsay receiving his award for attending 30 exercise sessions from YMCA staff

Acknowledgements:

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For further information please contact Bernadette Mulcahy (Community Nurse at MCHS) bernadette@mchs.org.au or ph 9319 9460.

"I feel better after exercise and I am not so upset at work" (female employee with an intellectual impairment who also experiences anxiety)

