

Sunbury Community Health Centre – A Brief History

In 1974, the federal government of Gough Whitlam offered money for the establishment of community health centre across Australia. A group of people in the township of Sunbury Victoria (population 9000) thought this was their chance. At a public meeting held on 14 March 1974 the federal government granted the Shire of Bulla \$88,000. There were initial discussions around how the funds could be spent and a management committee was established.

The committee decided to become a registered body. The Sunbury Community Health Centre Society was registered on 18 June 1974 and in July they purchased a one and a half acre site on the corner of Gap Road and Horne Street. A temporary building was moved on the site and the committee appointed Mr Jim Weatherill as Executive Officer. A receptionist, community health nurse, social worker and physiotherapist were employed. On 5 August 1976 the first annual general meeting was held. Within three months of operation all positions had been filled.

The first task for the staff was to turn the portable into a 'functional home' for the community health centre. The Centre initially developed programs in response to direct requests and from direct conversation with people.



Figure 1 Established 1976

At the Centre's first Annual General Meeting, the guest speaker, Professor Neil Carson, spoke about 'Community Health Centres – are they any use?' He identified that community health could become a role model for using an allied health team approach to prevent people from needing expensive medical care in hospitals. Professor Carson's words echo across the years. His challenge to the Sunbury Community was accepted and has served as a guide for the development of a high quality of care service delivery model for the community health field.

In 1979 the Centre successfully lobbied for a \$450,000 grant and a new Centre was officially opened on 24 April 1981. The Sunbury Rotary Club donated the first mini bus and it was soon in constant use and a driver was employed full-time. Family Day Care came to Sunbury and the Scheme was operated from the Centre. Occupational therapists ran a Day Centre, Independence Group, Early Childhood Development programs, youth activities, Adult Literacy Group and student supervision. None of these activities would have been possible without the large number of volunteers.

Supporting the community and support from the community, including the local newspaper, service clubs and residents has been fundamental to the Centre's growth.

The 1980s saw a decade of consolidation and change. Following the resignation of Mr Jim Weatherill (1976-1982), Mr Bruce Anderson (1982-1986) and subsequently Ms Ros Stevens (1986-2010) and Mr Philip Ripper (2010-present) were appointees to the Executive Officer position. Optometry and audiology services commenced and the Centre adopted the 'Wellness Model of Health'. This model explains 'health' in the broadest possible terms and saw the development of innovative programs targeting specific groups within the community. 'Wellness' defined as connected, active, curious, learning and giving continues to be a focus for the Centre today.



Figure 2 Permanent building (1986)

The Sunbury Community Health Centre has been the recipient of numerous awards, including Innovation and Excellence in Community Health awards for Health Promotion and the National Accreditation Certificate awarded in 1994 when Sunbury became the first Victorian Centre to be given national accreditation.



Figure 3 Current location

The story of Community Health in Sunbury continues to be written and is one of achievement, persistence through change, adversity and commitment. It is a human story, full of incredible characters. And it is one that wouldn't have happened without the support and enthusiasm of the Sunbury Community.