THE WELL WOMEN PROJECT: MEETING WOMEN’S NUTRITION NEEDS AT THE ADELAIDE WOMEN’S PRISON

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The Well Women Project (WWP), based for 12 months at the Adelaide Women’s Prison (AWP), was funded by a Primary Health Care Advancement grant from the SA Department of Human Services (DHS). The project was coordinated by the SA Department for Correctional Services (DCS) and Nutrition and Food Services at the Royal Adelaide Hospital (RAH). DCS contracted project officers: Helen Nikolas, Senior Dietitian/Nutritionist (full time) and Carol Fudali, Home Economist/Nutrition Educator (half time).

The AWP is the primary women’s facility in the state and caters for all security categories. It has a capacity of 77 prisoners with 49 in the mainstream women's centre and 28 in a low security Living Skills Unit (LSU). From the period 1 July 1999 to 25th Feb 2000, 284 women had been housed at the prison, at any one time there were up to 45 women in mainstream and up to 21 women in the independent Living Skills Unit (LSU) during the span of the project.

In seeking funding, DCS had received and were responding to complaints from the women about poor food. The DCS Health Promotion Officer and the Nutritionist with Public and Environmental Health Service were instrumental in obtaining funding. The general manager at AWP wanted a food service that met the needs of the women, to provide choice, good presentation/service, to get the women involved and provide some normalcy. The goal of the WWP was to enable women temporarily housed at Adelaide Women’s Prison to maintain, control and improve nutritional determinants of health & that of their children. The Well Women Project objectives were to review and revise all aspects of food services as well as provide learning experiences for the women at AWP in the area of nutrition and practical food related skills.

Since 1984, some nutrition intervention had occurred in SA men’s prisons, including menu review and recommendations. In the past, a typical prison menu provided high fat, processed foods, a lot of fried food, pre-packaged high fat/salt/processed items, little fruit and vegetables and no attention to particular nutrient needs to prevent chronic illness such as heart disease. Sometimes, special diets were requested unnecessarily because the basic menu was not suitable for good health. The special meal preparation was time-consuming and the food provided for special diets was sometimes nutritionally inadequate and repetitive.

Historically about 20% of prisoners request special meals, about 60% of prisoners have hepatitis C and require a lower fat diet, some prisoners have diabetes and others food allergies. The women’s prison also houses pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and young children. So, overall it was necessary to improve and streamline the provision of special diets and ensure nutritional needs were met. The food service at AWP had only a skeleton menu and ordering system in place. When catering officers left there was no structure, recipes or procedures for the next person to follow.

The Project was supported by an advisory group reflective of the many issues involved. Membership included representatives from the Royal Adelaide Hospital, DCS Health Promotion, DCS Aboriginal Services, SA Forensic Health Services, Eat Well SA, SA Drug and Alcohol Council, Child and Youth Health, DHS, Nunkuwarrin Yunti and Adelaide Women’s Prison.

The Well Women project stressed the importance of the individual’s responsibility to her own health. Seven wide ranging objectives were set, with the aim to maintain and improve the health of prisoners and ultimately their children.
improving the nutritional status of female prisoners, including those with special dietary requirements through the use of appropriate clinical services;

increasing nutritional balance and choice of food provided by the kitchen;

decreasing the spread of infectious diseases and reducing the risk of food borne illness through safe food handling practices and procedures;

increasing skills and knowledge of prisoners in relation to cooking, budgeting, nutrition and childhood nutrition, by means of a Food and Nutrition Education Program;

increasing participation of Aboriginal women in the activities of the WWP;

implementing ecologically sustainable strategies to support maintenance of the environment;

improving food services and nutrition education standards in SA prisons;

Outcomes of the project included:

◊ improved nutrition and food services at AWP and the development of guidelines and benchmarks transferable to other prisons;

◊ improved nutritional status of the women in mainstream through the implementation of a choice, balanced menu that met women’s nutritional needs;

◊ recipe file created for 2 seasonal menus

◊ reduced turnover of prisoners who cook in the kitchen;

◊ catering officer position is now seen as custodial specialist and the position is backfilled on days off;

◊ increased prisoner knowledge re cooking and hygiene in the kitchen;

◊ contribution to the food related knowledge and skills of women in prison through cooking classes, health promotion activities and nutrition education;

◊ resource gathering, networking and sharing of ideas and strategies.

There was an inherent belief that solutions and ideas gained from the experience of the WWP in nutrition and food service would be transferable to other prisons in SA.

AWP management and the correctional officers were very supportive of the project. Liaison with the Aboriginal service providers, including DCS Aboriginal Services and the Aboriginal Liaison and Education Officers at AWP, was significant to ensure the needs of the Aboriginal women were met. Aboriginal Australians make up 18% of the South Australian prison population and it is recognized they have been especially disadvantaged in the wider community. This is reflected in their health status. It is widely accepted that Aboriginal people have a higher prevalence of nutrition related diseases and have a higher risk of malnutrition on admission to correctional facilities. One of the WWP objectives was to ensure that Aboriginal women participated proportionally in all activities. This was achieved, often by actively encouraging the women to join in or by attending meetings lead by other Aboriginal Service providers.

About 20% of the women at AWP are Aboriginal or of diverse cultural background, including Hindu and Vietnamese. Their unique issues were addressed and a policy on cultural diversity was drafted, representing a positive change at the prison. For example, the new menu included more foods enjoyed in other cultures, eg rice on a regular basis, stir fry and noodle dishes. Curry was accepted by the women on the menu for the first time, as the new menu
structure allowed for choice of main meal. Other foods were made available and the Hindu and Vietnamese women were given the opportunity to cook in the kitchen under the supervision of the catering officer. A successful Vietnamese meal was cooked for all women in mainstream with the assistance of one of the Vietnamese women, who was given an ovation by the other women after the meal was over.

Other draft policies written during the WWP included the provision of therapeutic diets, menu guidelines and antidiscrimination in the kitchen for workers with hepatitis C.

Community development principles were used throughout the project and AWP management supported this approach with the women. The women played a large part in the changes and willingly contributed. In addition the ensured they were appreciated for their efforts to join in and offer ideas as the project officers gave prizes and incentives of new foods to taste and share. All with a nutrition education focus, eg a breads and soy products tasting and survey session. Consensus was reached by providing a relaxed way of communicating and developing a basic level of trust, meetings were held at times suitable for the women, in their areas. The project officers were always available to the women and became part of their day to day lives.

Most changes achieved during the project came about through wide consultation with the women. For example, regular Health Committee meetings were held in mainstream and two satisfaction surveys were undertaken, firstly to gain input and secondly to evaluate changes. Informal discussion was ongoing. Cooks meetings, menu meetings and regular kitchen staff meetings were held to gain input from the women and assist in the implementation of ideas. In the Living Skills Unit the women were consulted about equipment stock as well as cooking and nutrition education sessions and the development of a recipe book. Regular ‘drop in’ sessions were held and the women felt free to drop in to the office or have informal discussions at any time.

The logo for the WWP project: three hearts symbolising love, wellness, hope, tenderness, family and life was designed and chosen by the women. They were invited to submit ideas, all the women voted on a choice and prizes were awarded with a presentation ceremony, attended by the CEO and other guests. Six entries were submitted and 95% of the women voted.

Women have special nutrition needs, including the need for adequate calcium, iron and folate as well as dietary issues related to breast cancer and heart disease, for example. In addition, women in prison are likely to be sole supporting mothers and may be from a low socio-economic background. As gatekeepers of family health they are prime candidates for practical learning experiences on nutrition. Many women in prison do not have a stable family background and as a result have not acquired the basic knowledge of nutrition that is generally taken for granted. During the Well Women project, they had the opportunity to learn in another way.

The women at AWP have significant nutrition issues. For example, many have hepatitis C and realize that a lower fat diet with more fruit and vegetables will help improve the way they feel. Constipation is a problem for people on methadone. These and other issues supported the need to create a nutritionally adequate menu, lower in fat and higher in fibre for all the women and provide opportunities for education. Changes to the menu included: orange juice at breakfast, Hi fibre breads and cereals as a standard, yogurt, more fruit, lower fat items on the menu and soy products available. Cooking methods were also reviewed and recipes shared.
and collected. An effort to encourage the women to drink more fluid resulted in the installation of a water filter. The cooks and the women took an interest, stating they felt ‘empowered’ as the changes took place. In January 2000 a new heart healthy menu, that streamlined the provision of special diets and was balanced to suit women’s needs was introduced. In October 2000 AWP received a Heart Week award in recognition of this achievement, from the National Heart Foundation.

People may have poor dietary habits and poor food intake on admission to prison, for a number of reasons. Simply eating three balanced meals a day improves their health and well-being and provides the opportunity to model healthy eating. Nutrition counselling was been undertaken by the dietitian, with both project officers being involved in informal discussions on nutrition with both the women and the correctional officers.

All the women and officers were targeted for a variety of health promotion activities including nutrition topics, such as Healthy Bones and Heart Weeks and food tasting. The project officers travelled to the different areas in the prison with displays and food tastings. Food was used in many instances, eg for social occasions and farewells, at meetings and displays. It gave the opportunity to introduce new or healthier choices and promote activities that would be considered ‘normal’ but that the women may not have been exposed to previously.

Biweekly cooking sessions were held in the independent Living Skills Unit for the full 12 months. They were held in the communal visits area, which housed the only stove on site. This provided an opportunity for the women to learn skills and healthy ways of cooking, as well as a social atmosphere in which the women could learn from each other and from behaviour modelled by the Home Economist/Nutrition Educator. Attendance was voluntary and the sessions ran after working hours. Sometimes the women took pride in being a “guest cook”, planning and leading a session. These became a focal point for nutrition education in LSU.

During the 2nd half of the project a 6 week ‘Eating for Wellness’ program was developed in conjunction with DCS and AWP Education departments. The women received credit for their Certificate of General Education. By the end of March 2000, 7 women had successfully completed the course, with 14 in total by June 2000. Sessions were run with the assistance of the catering officer. Topics included food hygiene, budgeting, nutrition education and cooking skills.

Fostering partnerships with the community was important. A strong link was developed with the local Environmental Health Officer (EHO) who become an excellent resource eg providing food hygiene resource material in other languages. The WA FoodSafe food hygiene training program was implemented and the women receive certificates on completion that are recognised in the community. The kitchen has now had 2 excellent inspection reports in the new schedule of visits from the EHO. These credible activities raised the profile of the kitchen with other prisoners and the community. Resources and support came from a variety of community health organisations, including the National heart Foundation. AWP and the WWP received a Heart Week 2000 award for creating a heart healthy menu and food service for the women in mainstream.
The project has received positive media and community attention as well as interest from interstate. Positive media attention has included local news coverage, a local talk back radio interview and letters from the community and members of Parliament. Some of the women participated in a positive and open way to share their experience of the WWP.

Transfer of the lessons learned in the WWP is now underway in all SA prisons and DCS has extended the funding for the Senior Dietitian/Nutritionist for an initial 12 month period. Policy development began and some assistance was provided to other SA prisons during the WWP. The first Professional Development Day for DCS Catering Officers was held in November 1999. A summary of the recommendations, developed with input from the WWP steering committee, made from the project to DCS is attached.

The initiative and lessons learned make the Well Women Project an example of a successful health promotion pilot project, based in Corrections and supported by intersectoral alliances.
Summary of the WWP Recommendations

**Recommendations**

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<td>Formulate DCS nutrition and food service policy and incorporate in the DCS policy framework.</td>
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<td>Input into DCS Health Review on nutrition issues and provide input as needed to DCS projects with a nutrition component</td>
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<td>Periodic benchmarking and networking with Dietitians in other corrections jurisdictions</td>
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<td>Address nutrition issues, special diets, cultural diversity, food hygiene, consultation, menu guidelines in all SA prisons</td>
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<td>Review a coordinated approach to DCS food purchasing practices</td>
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<td>Develop Intersectoral partnerships,</td>
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<td>Facilitate a network for catering officers, provide resources, support and training. Collaborate re training kitchen staff and prisoner movement</td>
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<td>Review and provide prisoner nutrition education, review funding sources.</td>
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<td>Continue work started on nutrition screening, counselling and referral. Liaise with SA Forensic Health Services</td>
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<td>Implement food hygiene training/food safety plan/regular EHO inspection in all prisons</td>
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<td>Ensure DCS food services employees have training in cultural sensitivity and have adequate training to work with offenders and people who use drugs</td>
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<td>Collaborate with PRIME re industry food ideas and managing Mobilong food service</td>
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<td>Ensure progress and developments are documented and evaluated</td>
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**Note:** In June 2000, DCS extended the Senior Dietitian/Nutritionist position until July 2001, to continue and transfer the work completed in project to other SA prisons. It may not be possible to address all these recommendations in this 12 month period.