

NORTH QUEENSLAND SUN-SAFETY AWARD: LESSONS LEARNED FROM A HEALTH PROMOTION PILOT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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ABSTRACT

Issue addressed: North Queensland (NQ) has the highest rates of skin cancer in the world. The North Queensland Skin Cancer Network aimed to promote sun-safety to a wider audience than their Townsville base. A pilot award scheme was conceived to promote the development of quality sun-safety strategies by Local Government Authorities (LGAs). This paper describes the development and outcomes of the pilot award scheme, and explores the barriers and enabling factors to participating in the scheme. **Methods:** All NQ councils were encouraged to enter the awards for sun-safe initiatives. A 7-point assessment criterion was used by five judges to determine the winner, who received a plaque, perpetual trophy and \$2500 for further sun-safety initiatives at an award ceremony attended by the media. Feedback was obtained about non-participation. **Results:** Seven entries were received from four rural and two regional councils. Most entries showcased shade structures. The winner, a regional shire council, nominated their development of a recreational facility incorporating an urban forest. Barriers to participation included: inadequate priority allocated by councils to sun-safety initiatives; workforce shortages; lack of economic viability; and incomplete projects at closure of nomination. **Conclusion:** Whilst distribution of the award report demonstrating innovative sun-safety projects to all councils was a good outcome, LGAs were probably the wrong audience for the small financial prize. Targeting community groups, schools and individuals may have elicited more entries, enabling greater reach of the sun-safety messages and thereby increasing demand for council investment in sun-safety by the community.

KEY WORDS: Sun-safety; Skin cancer prevention; Local government; Health promotion; Shade provision; Barriers to participation

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INTRODUCTION

Sun exposure is the major environmental risk factor for non-melanoma skin cancer (NMSC) (International Agency for Research on Cancer, 1992). Australia has the highest recorded incidence of NMSC in the world (Stanton et al., 2004) with over 380,000 people diagnosed, and more than 1300 deaths annually (Staples, 2003). Within Australia, North Queensland (NQ) has one of the highest reported rates of all types of skin cancer (Buettner and Raasch, 1998). Melanoma and NMSC have been targeted in the National Health Priority Area of Cancer Control (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000).

Early detection of skin cancer improves treatment options and patient outcomes (Jerant et al., 2000). Whilst skin cancer is perceived by the community to be highly preventable (Smith et al., 1999), a comprehensive approach to prevention should follow the Ottawa Charter edict of building healthy public policy, creating supportive environments, strengthening community action, developing personal skills, and reorienting health services (World Health Organisation, 1986).

A co-ordinated vision outlining skin cancer prevention activities in Queensland was described in the Queensland Skin Cancer Prevention Strategic Plan 2001 – 2005 (Queensland Health, 2001). In line with this plan, the North Queensland Skin Cancer Network (NQSCN) was established in 2001, bringing together representatives from key organisations with an interest in skin cancer prevention. Building on the success of annual public

awareness events which the NQSCN had hosted in Townsville for some years during National Skin Cancer Action Week, the group sought a wider audience to target with sun-safety messages.

The NQSCN invited Local Government Authorities (LGA), who are ideally placed to influence healthy public policy, create supportive "sun-protective" environments and strengthen community action (World Health Organisation, 1986), to showcase sun-safety initiatives through participation in a community sun safety award and to receive recognition for their efforts. This report describes the development, outcomes, barriers, and enabling factors of the pilot award scheme for sun-safety initiatives nominated by LGAs in NQ.

METHODS

The North Queensland Community Sun-Safety Award (NQCSSA) was promoted to delegates attending the 2005 NQ Local Government Managers Association conference. Invitations to participate were mailed to the executive and councillors of all councils in NQ (defined as the area of Queensland south to Sarina and west to the Queensland-Northern Territory border). Benefits to the winning council included promotion through signage, prize money (to reinvest in further sun-safety strategies or infrastructure in the local community) and positive media coverage of the award ceremony.

Entries, of a 500 word report or a series of four photographs accompanied by explanations, opened on the 1st July and closed in early October 2005. Eligible initiatives included: constructed shade; natural shade provided by trees and shrubs planted in the previous 12 months; or sun-safety programs providing personal sun protection to sectors of the community during the previous financial year.

Shortly before the closing date we telephoned Council executive officers to ensure the award documentation had reached the relevant departments. A brief interview was conducted to determine the reasons why councils that had not submitted an application were not participating. For the councils that had submitted an application, council officers were asked whether they intended to submit future applications and the major benefits they perceived in applying.

Five impartial judges with relevant expertise assessed the entries. Each was blinded to the opinions of the other judges. Evaluation criteria included: innovation; appropriateness of materials used; ease of use (e.g. accessibility and availability); community involvement; promotional strategies; perceived benefits; and sustainability (Bartlett et al., 2008). Each criterion was ranked 0 – 10 where 0 = none and 10 = very high, with the maximum possible score being 350.

RESULTS

Six councils submitted seven entries for the award, including both text and pictures (2 to 4 pictures and 130 to 640 words). Two were regional councils (populations 54,000 and 68,000) and four were rural (population range 400 to 10,000). Most entries incorporated shade structures although Rural Council 2 and Regional Council 1 entered shade policies as well as shade structures. All entries performed well against the judging criteria of innovation, appropriateness, ease of use, perceived benefits and sustainability. With the exception of Rural Council 1 (runner-up), and Regional Council 2 – entry 2 (winner), most entries (5/7) performed poorly in gaining community involvement or promoting their sun safety project to the public (Table 1).

Outcomes: Outcomes from the pilot included: seven eligible entries; a report to all councils (http://www.qldcancer.com.au/nqccr/nqcss_award.html) demonstrating innovative entries; adaption of the concept by a corporate sponsor who now provides shade grants and gazebo rental; strategies to improve the process for future award projects; and information on an upstream health promotion model i.e. prevention of excessive exposure to ultraviolet light, through use of policies or built shade, thus reducing the risk of future skin cancer. This model could be used to encourage other community health initiatives such as physical activity or eating well. Other positive elements included council staff focusing on the benefits of past and current sun-safety projects and how they could be improved in the future. The award report enabled all councils to review the entries and adapt some of these ideas to improve sun-safety in their local area (Table 2).

Barriers to participation: Shortly before the closing date we conducted a brief interview by telephoning all non applicants to explore their reasons for not participating. The major reason for not submitting entries for this award was that councils had other priorities for their time and finances. More specifically, of the 32 non-indigenous councils: 6 (19%) submitted entries; 7 (22%) had no suitable projects; 4 (13%) reported the information had

not been passed on by the executive to the relevant area; 1 (3%) council reported not having a budget for sun-safety projects in the previous year and 8 (25%) councils said they had insufficient resources to complete an entry. In fact, one rural council employee stated they were so short-staffed they could not spare a staff member for the four hour drive to take photographs of initiatives undertaken in the past year and staff members from two other councils reported that the prize money was insufficient to make an entry economically viable. We were unable to obtain a comment from six councils (Table 2).

Enablers to participation: During late August, council executive officers were telephoned to ensure the award documentation had reached the relevant departments. Feedback received during these calls from council officers intending to participate in the award included: (i) an aim of councils is to gain positive media coverage, thus a major facilitator to participation was the proposed media coverage of the winning council's accomplishments in sun-safety; (ii) the financial award was a secondary advantage for smaller councils (Rural council 3 hoped to use the winnings toward a new shade sail), but was immaterial to regional councils with larger budgets (the winning council did not have a specific project for the financial award); (iii) a simple, easy to complete application was also identified by council officers as a participation enabler (Table 2).

DISCUSSION

The most disappointing outcome of this pilot award was that only seven eligible entries were received in spite of the investment of considerable effort following up potential participants. However our sponsor was sufficiently satisfied to support the award the following year.

Information provided by a number of council officers led us to conclude that the chief barrier to Councils providing sun-safe strategies is that they have more important things to do with their money, such as managing roads and rubbish. For Councils to increase the prioritisation of sun-safety initiatives, their perceived importance needs to be lifted. As councils often follow their communities' expectations, one way to raise the importance of sun-safety is to increase the awareness and demand for them by the community. Building healthy public policy and creating supportive environments by councils will come second to strengthening community actions and developing personal skills. Whilst the aim of our campaign was to raise awareness of sun-safety in populations at risk, for equity we invited all councils in NQ to participate. The low incidence of skin cancer in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population (Queensland Cancer Fund, 2006) and lack of funding for sun safety initiatives may have contributed to the lack of entries from the 32 indigenous councils.

Lack of written or photographic evidence of community involvement in five of the entries was responsible for their poor performance in this category of the judging criteria. The best performing entries provided both written and photographic evidence demonstrating extensive community involvement in not only using the facility but in its creation. Likewise, lack of evidence such as promoting their project in a Council newsletter, flyers with rates notices, information in local papers or radio was responsible for poor performance in the promotional strategy category. The two projects with the best overall scores received the highest scores for this criterion although all entries scored less well than for other categories.

CONCLUSION

Whilst our aims were to promote sun-safety and recognise successful community sun exposure interventions in north Queensland and adhere to the Ottawa Charter convention of influencing healthy public policy, creating supportive

environments and strengthening community action; councils do not appear to be the most effective target audience, despite most having suitable projects. To achieve a greater reach, we now believe that we should invite community organisations, such as schools, service clubs and possibly individuals to nominate. Additional categories could include innovative ideas appropriate to a local community.

Table 1: 2005 North Queensland Community Sun Safety Award Entries

Entry		Overall Score (/ 350)
Rural council 1 (pop 10,000): 3 sustainable solid-roof shade structures for the Skate Park, Half Basketball Court & BMX track		251
Rural council 2 (pop 8,000): Work place health & safety clothing policy; a shade-tree planting program & solid-roof shade structures over play centres		235
Rural council 3 (pop 2,200): 2 shade sails for the smaller swimming pool & skate park		166
Rural council 4 (pop 400): Permanent shade structures over playground equipment & adjacent to buildings at a local lake & childcare centre		230
Regional council 1 (pop 68,000): Playground shade policy facilitating initial solid-roof shade structure		227
Regional council 2 (pop 54,000): Entry 1 - Open space & recreational park strategy to shade 51 existing playgrounds, soft fall & BBQ areas & planting 2000-3000 street trees/year for the next 5 years		233
Regional council 2 (pop 54,000): Entry 2 - A one hectare Urban Forest development shading several activity centres within an easily accessible park		280

Table 2: 2005 North Queensland Community Sun Safety Award Barriers, Enablers and Outcomes

Barriers	Enablers	Outcomes
Sun-safety not a top priority for many councils	Positive media attention	7 Applications
No suitable projects to enter	Positive media attention may enable increased public utilization of facilities	Promotion of winner and runner up in the media
Incomplete projects were ineligible	Positive media attention may raise community sun-safety expectations of councils	Award report outlining entries: distributed to all NQ councils
No funding to undertake projects	Financial prize	Providing a model for use in other areas of health
Insufficient resources / uneconomical to complete application	Ability to demonstrate high investment payback of sun-safe projects e.g. shading bike/walkways thus reducing road use	Repeat sponsorship of award
Competing projects for council funds e.g. roads & rubbish		Concept adapted by corporate sponsor who now provides shade grants & gazebo rental
Information not passed on from executive	Brief entry requirements	Award trophies: perpetual and plaques
Difficulty identifying relevant area within LGA for delivery of award information	Ability to demonstrate and promote successful projects internally and externally	Information on ways to improve the process for future award projects Focus on past projects during application process enables review of current/future projects

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