

Abstract

Background: Sheds have been used in Australia for decades as an intervention to try and promote 'health by stealth' amongst men by providing a social space for those who may be particularly vulnerable to poor mental health. Little is known about the impact of Men's sheds in England.

Methods: Members of 19 sheds from one local authority area were invited to participate in focus groups to explore their perceptions of their shed. In total 32 men participated in five focus groups which were analysed using applied thematic analysis.

Results: Whilst some sheds run activities, the main driving factor of sheds was the social aspect, with many coming along for nothing more than a chat and a cup of tea, allowing men to recapture lost social networks from their working days. However it was felt that there could be more formal links forged between individual groups which may result in a better range of activities on offer.

Conclusions: This study indicates that the shed can be an effective way of reducing social isolation in older men. However, further work is needed to understand what impact the shed has on physical and mental well-being.

Introduction

Life expectancy for men and women continues to increase worldwide; men in the United Kingdom (UK) can now expect to live for an average of 79.1 years, compared to 82.8 years for women [1]. Despite increases in average life expectancy, health inequalities between sexes continues to be a problem. Men are more likely to die from cardiovascular disease [2], diseases related to alcohol consumption [3], from cancer [4] to die from suicide [5] and to suffer from poorer mental health compared to women [6].

The population of the United Kingdom is ageing with more pensioners residing in the country than children under the age of 16 [7, 8] with an increasing number of people living with chronic health conditions, such as those listed above [9]. This is especially true for men, who tend to eat an unhealthier diet, drink more alcohol, and make less use of health services, [10]. There is a wealth of evidence which suggests a positive association between physical and mental health. Poor mental health is associated with greater risk of physical health problems, and poor physical health is associated with more mental health problems [11, 12]. Therefore any intervention which addresses mental or physical health is likely to also improve the other [13]. While studies have looked at the impact of various activities on improving the health and mental well-being of older adults [14-16] few studies have looked at interventions specifically designed to improve the physical and mental well-being of men.

An initiative which was pioneered in Australia takes a different approach to promoting mental health and well-being amongst men [17]. Men in Australia have traditionally used sheds as a space where they can engage in practical ‘DIY’ activities such as woodwork, and metalwork. For older men, especially those whom are no longer engaged in full-time employment, community sheds can offer a communal space where they can work on meaningful projects [10] with the primary aim to reduce risk factors associated with suicide such as social isolation and unemployment [18-20]. Sheds are staffed by a co-ordinator trained in suicide prevention [21]. Evidence suggests that community based sheds can improve the well-being of retired men by providing a space that facilitates learning and addresses issues of social isolation [10, 22]. Sheds generally operate in a workshop style environment, which vary in size depending on levels of funding and the type of programme they are engaged in [17]. Most studies looking at the impact of men’s sheds have utilised a qualitative approach to gain feedback from shedders (as participants are known) [5, 22-24]. Relatively little evidence has been collected on the effectiveness of men’s sheds in the United Kingdom, and that which exists has focussed on

men's sheds in Northern Ireland [25]. Therefore it is important to begin building evidence of the effectiveness of men's sheds in England.

Whilst the Australian model focussed mainly on activities such as woodwork, and other arts and crafts, the model within the North East of England was designed to reduce risk factors associate with suicidal behaviour, such as social isolation, and therefore is much more geared towards providing a social space. This primary aim of this study was to explore men's experiences of participating in sheds in the North East of England.

Methods

A qualitative approach was used to gain insight into the experiences of men participating in community based sheds in the North East of England. A series of focus groups were held with shedders between May and July 2015, with each focus group composed of participants from the shed which they attended. Focus groups were used as we were interested in exploring the shared experiences of shedders. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Newcastle University Research Ethics Committee (819/2014) and by the research governance group within the local authority.

Participants

All co-ordinators of men's sheds within the locality were approached to provide participants for focus groups, with five agreeing for their shed to take part. Co-ordinators were asked to distributed information sheets to shedders, a date and time was arranged for the focus group and those attending on the day were invited to participate. Participants received no reimbursement for their time.

The included sheds represented a variety of geographical regions, activities offered, and ages. As sheds did not keep records of their members we cannot say if our sample was representative of the overall shed population. Characteristics of the Sheds included in the focus groups can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Shed and participant characteristics

Shed	Locality	Age range of shedders	Activities on offer	Opening times	Focus group participants (N)
1	Urban	30-69	Art, walking, woodcarving, bowling, food provided, informal chat	1 day per week, 2 hours	7
2	Rural	50-59	Social activities, gardening, car maintenance	1 day per week, 2.5 hours	10
3	Urban	40-59	Drop in sessions, lunches, trips out	1 day per week, 2 hours	8
4	Rural	30-59	Darts, pool, and informal chat	2 days per week, 1 hour each day	5
5	Rural	18-49	Informal Chat, gardening	1 day per week, 2 hours	2

Data Collection

Focus Groups

Participants were asked questions designed to gain feedback on their experience of the sheds. These included why men had begun attending their shed, what sort of activities were offered, and what impact the shed has had on their well-being.

Analysis

Focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and subjected to applied thematic analysis [26]; a phenomenological approach to qualitative analysis focussing on the experience of participants. Analysis begins by coding transcripts, with similar codes grouped together into themes and sub-themes. An inductive approach to coding was utilised in the analysis as we were not coding in line with any particular theory. Each focus group was coded independently by two researchers before final themes were agreed. In cases of disagreement, themes were discussed until consensus was reached [27, 28].

Results

A total of 32 men took part in five focus groups (Mean = 6.4; Range = 2-10) which lasted on average 41 minutes. Two major themes emerged from the analysis, with a number of sub-themes within each: Improved social connectedness and Recommendations for the future. Key findings are presented below.

Improved social connectedness

Reduced Social Isolation

A recurrent theme which emerged from the focus groups related to the improved social connectedness which can arise for shedders. Many shedders mentioned that if it was not for their group then they would have nothing else to look forward to; with the shed representing the only time they left their house. The shed also represented a safe place for men to talk to other men about problems they may have.

“I live on me own, my wife died two years ago, and if I didn’t have this I would have nothing. You come in on a night time, shut the door and that’s it, I’ve got no social life as such” – *Focus Group (FG) 1, Participant (P)2*

“You can talk about your troubles here, confidential and all, keep it among ourselves” – FG 2, P2

Reclaimed social networks

Another common aspect of the focus groups was that many shedders were older men who had worked in male dominated industries such as coal mining. The shed was seen as an opportunity to regain lost social networks from their working days with shedders often coming from similar working backgrounds which provided an opportunity for reminiscing about the past.

“I thought it was a good idea, get a load of men together. Coz [sic] a lot are with their wives all day, or girlfriends. It’s nice to get out and be just amongst men. Because if you don’t work, you’d be used to being with lots of blokes” – FG 3, P5

“Look down the table here and the majority of people worked down the mine and that was a special place in terms of working with [P: Camaraderie] yeah being able to talk and it was quite unique there was nowhere else like it, we relive that” – FG 4, P3

Group Outings provide opportunity to share interests

The regular group outings organised by the individual sheds were seen as a positive by many shedders. The majority of activities tended to be educational based, or linked to the former careers of the shedders. However, shedders from one group felt they were not in a position to organise outings, something which they felt was unfair as they knew other groups regularly organised such trips.

“We’ve had a canny [trip] to [Victorian village] and that was the full day... most of them being ex-miners they went round the mining part” – FG 4, P2

“We try to organise a day trip to go to the Great York Show... and everything was going rosy, until about a week before when they said they’ve got no money to do it” – Focus Group 5, P1

Support of the shed coordinator

A lot of shedders praised the co-ordinators whom they felt were always there for them. Shedders from one particular group felt that their co-ordinator was responsible for turning their lives around and had prevented them from returning to prison. Whilst there was often variation

in the level of involvement in the group form co-ordinators, most felt that they could talk to their co-ordinator about anything, and they would always be on hand if they needed support.

“If it wasn’t for the fact [co-ordinator] saved me really I’d be in prison” – *FG 2, P10*

“She’s brilliant... Yes, she’ll come in for the first fifteen, twenty minutes, chat, tell us what’s going on, then just goes right, if you need us, I’m always here, come and see us” – *FG 3, P2*

Desire to maintain male only groups

A talking point which arose in a number of groups focussed on the inclusion of women as shedders. Many expressed their objection to the idea of having mixed groups, feeling that the way the talk to each other may be inappropriate in mixed company which could impinge on the social networks the shedders have developed. In particular members of one shed felt that their village lacked amenities just for men, with the shed being the only thing just for them, and they were not willing to give that up.

“Got no objection to it you know we have a girl on our staff, she’s helped us a couple of times hasn’t she... some of us can get a bit loose with our mouths, not too inappropriate just in general if there was a lady there” – *FG 1, P1*

“No, not at all, no they (women) can have their group we can have ours I think they would hold the conversation back, like, to be honest. There are more facilities in our village in terms of groups and such for the female than there is for the male.” – *FG 4, P3*

Recommendations for the future

The second theme to emerge from the analysis centred on recommendations for the future of the programme. Whilst some common recommendations were raised by all of the sheds the majority of the recommendations were unique to individual sheds which given the independent nature of the groups is not surprising.

Shed network

There was a general feeling expressed that the programme would benefit from establishing formal links between the sheds. This may help keep shedders engaged whilst encouraging new shedders by offering access to the wide range of activities on offer throughout the network. There was also a suggestion that sheds could share resources, as not all groups attract the same number of members, meaning some activities such as organising group outings are not financially viable. However, if sheds were to come together to organise outings related to shared interests then this may help spread the cost.

“(P1). So we end up where we can get a forum with other groups as well... (P2)
Would be nice to know where the other groups are” – *FG 1, P1 & 2*

“Not only that, like, we desperate for a pool table. There’s no clubs play each other, could get that going or something like that” – *FG 5, P2*

More directed activities

Whilst many of the sheds offer directed activities, led by an external instructor, such as technical or craft activities, often shedders have nothing more than a cup of tea. Whilst having a social space may provide some benefits to those who otherwise would have little or no social contact, there was a suggestion that further directed activities would be welcomed. One group in particular described a gardening course as the best thing they had ever done. Other shedders discussed attending on a more regular basis if they could have a morning activity. However, changing the format of sheds may detract from what has made them work and could disengage existing shedders, it may be more beneficial to organise extra activities at times when the shed does not currently run.

“I think it would be nice to have like, a full day. Have, something in the morning or say, something in the afternoon. Or if you have something in the morning you can talk about it in the afternoon.” – *FG 3, P5*

“It’s only been the last three weeks I’ve gotten any enjoyment out of this because we’ve had... two people in from the gardening... which, it’s been absolutely fantastic. I don’t go nowhere else during the week, apart from here... But, apart from that we’ve had nothing. We’ve been sat at the table with a cup of tea.” – *FG 5, P2*

Discussion

Main findings of the study

Whilst the traditional model of men's sheds involved men working together on meaningful projects, one of the successes of the programme in the North East of England has been the provision of a social space for men who would otherwise have little or no social contact. Social isolation was a key factor discussed by a number of the groups, with many shedders attending because they had nothing else to do. Many participants had worked in traditional male dominated industries such as coal mining, and the shed serves as a replacement for the social networks developed during their careers.

The shed also provides an opportunity to share interests and partake in group outings. The majority of shedders organised a monthly outing where they would go to a local museum, or tourist attraction with the activity being picked by the shedders. However, not all groups were in a position to do this as it is not financially viable for them to organise group outings.

Previous research has highlighted the important role of the shed coordinator [17], something which clearly came across in this study. The coordinator is ultimately responsible for running the group, but their involvement in activities appeared to be minimal. Whilst they provide support to members, for the most part they appear to be in the background, never the less shedders drew comfort from knowing they were there and felt that they could talk to them about anything. Interestingly, whilst men were against having female members in the group, there seemed to be no objection to having female co-ordinators, which many groups have. This is perhaps because they tend to stay in the background, and allow the men to have their space [30].

What is already known on this topic?

The results of this study mirror findings from Australia, and other countries which show that sheds provides a supportive environment for men who may be at risk of social isolation, as well as other vulnerable groups [17,21, 23, 25].

Whilst Golding [24] believes that promoting men's sheds as a mechanism for health improvement would be counter-productive, the mere participation in sheds themselves is health promoting as research suggests that maintaining social networks in later life can counteract the negative effects of retirement and social isolation, with improved social capital being linked to improvements in both physical and mental health [29, 31].

What this study adds

Whilst the evidence provided in this study suggests that sheds provide a positive experience for shedders, it highlighted aspects which could be improved upon. Whilst one of the key successes of this programme centred on providing a social space for men, there was a feeling that groups could benefit from more instructor led activities. However, most of the groups have a core membership who are getting something from coming to the groups and there is a need to balance change, with predictability in order to avoid alienating existing members [32].

It is evident that sheds are much more than a space for men, they are somewhere where men can recapture lost social networks, talk like men without holding back, and they provide an opportunity to reduce social isolation and improve well-being [17-21]. However, there is the potential that the social connectedness gained by attending sheds could reinforce negative health behaviours if it is seen as the social norm for the group [31]. This is something which should be taken into consideration when planning the commissioning of sheds.

Limitations

Whilst this study provides an overview of the experiences of men participating in a community shed one of the limitations of this research is that we cannot say with any certainty that the shed has had an impact on the physical and mental well-being of participants. More work is needed in the future that examines the effectiveness of such an intervention on health and wellbeing and includes outcome measures to fully explore the impact of the sheds.

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