

MIEA TO PAT THE DOG

Judith Scott and Barbara Moffatt are retiring after a combined 30 years of service at the Mental Illness Education Australia (MIEA). MIEA began as a schools education project within ARAFMI and became an independent incorporated body in 1995. The aims of the organisation have been to raise awareness of mental illness in the community, particularly with young people; remove the stigma associated with mental illness; and to promote early intervention through schools presentations.

During its 12 years, the organisation has trained over 300 volunteers to visit over 200 schools, presenting to over 3500 students per year. Teams of two presenters, consisting of a consumer and carer, talk with students about mental illness from their own distinct perspectives. Judith says 'We just wanted to reach as many young people as possible. Early intervention is very important as a means of preventing long term illness.'

Both Barbara and Judith have seen many changes in the attitudes of young people since they began work in the area. Barbara recounts in the early days of the schools presentations that young people were not very forthcoming. 'In the past 5 years I have noticed a change in attitude. Young people are more open to discussing mental illness as it affects themselves and their families. I have heard young people talking about relatives having a mental illness in the same open manner that someone might talk about the flu. Even teachers have disclosed episodes of illness in their classes.' This breaking down of shame around mental illness is a positive step for sharing experiences and early intervention.

MIEA's achievements have not occurred in isolation and many organisations and individuals have been integral to the success of the project. An important aspect of the organisation's development has been its links with the NSW Department of Education. By adapting the presentations to comply with the Department's syllabus, their work complements the school curriculum. Rather than perceived as an 'add on', MIEA's work dovetails into the PDHPE (Personal Development, Health and Physical Education) strand.

After 12 years as a small independent organisation, MIEA will merge with Black Dog. Seen as a necessary move to expand the community education programs of MIEA, Barbara is philosophical about the development. 'It's been a very challenging time for staff; to watch a program that you've nurtured from the very beginning grow into a professional, reputable organisation, be handed over to another organisation. However we are confident the program is going to people who will continue to grow and nurture it into the future.'

Even though Black Dog has had a focus on research and clinical approach to mood disorders (such as depression and bipolar) MIEA doesn't feel that their focus on a broader range of illness will be affected by the integration. Jude says

'In the present climate, a small NGO with a specific mission, such as ours, would not get the opportunity to grow and expand. We have put down strong foundations; they can build the house.'

Jan Pennington, the school program coordinator, remains confident that there will be little change to the program even after the re-location to Black Dog premises in the grounds of NSW University. If anyone is interested in a schools presentation, please contact Jan on (02) 9382 4530 or via email miea-nsw@unsw.edu.au