

Men in Sheds: the importance of gendered spaces for health and wellbeing amongst older men.

Christine Milligan, Sheila Payne, Zoe Cockshott and Amanda Bingley, Lancaster University, UK.



 **CENTRE FOR
AGEING RESEARCH
LANCASTER UNIVERSITY**

**Lancaster
University** 



Men in Sheds

**Originated Australia
1990s;**

**Tailored to local and
national contexts;**

**Can be programme run by
statutory or voluntary/
community sector OR
organised and run
informally by shed
members themselves;**

**Can be viewed as complex
intervention designed to:
i) improve men's physical,
social, emotional &
spiritual health &
wellbeing; ii) alleviate
loneliness & social
isolation.**

The Study

- Mixed-method study of 3 Shed projects in UK involving 60 participants (in focus groups/in-depth interviews) plus secondary data;
- Shed 1: Ex-mining community E. Midlands – rural area, high unemployment, app. 22% of pop. 65+;
- Shed 2: inner-city location in SW England. High deprivation, high proportion BME pop. Around 11% pop. 65+;
- Shed 3: small town NW England in second most sparsely populated county in England. High prop. 65+ (24%);
- All Sheds open 4 days p.wk (a.m. and p.m. sessions). Shed co-ordinator 4-5 days per wk.

4 themes:

- What attracts older men to Sheds?
- The impact of Shed activity on health and well-being;
- Alleviating loneliness and social isolation; and
- The importance of Sheds as gendered spaces.

➤ **Bereavement or other significant life-change:**

My wife died, and I used to sit at home and look at the wallpaper, and I didn't feel like there was much more than that. And ... I had a bit of an illness and finished up with the social worker taking an interest in me. And she told me about Men in Sheds. ... And it got me out of the house. It got me to meet other people. ['Jim']

➤ **Downsizing following retirement:**

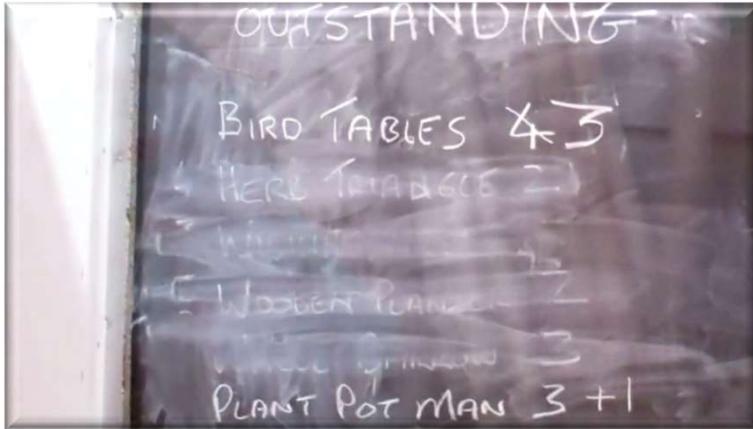
We'd downsized from a four-bedroomed house to a one bedroom flat, so I lost me garage and what have you. ['Roy']

➤ **Replacement for work and work-based relationships:**

Job satisfaction when you go home. That's the main thing. That's what you used to get when you was at work - if you made something.

And

Met the blokes. I thought to m'self, 'Well this is it. That's what you miss when you're at work.' – Or when you retire. It's the banter. ['Roy']



The majority of people had busy working lives where there were targets and production lines – and they don't particularly want it in retirement. ['Gordon']

It's the activity without any pressure. You do as much as you want to do. ... We all find our own level and we work or don't work. ... When I have been coming, if I don't feel up to it I don't do very much. ['Jim']



*Men keep saying 'I feel fine' and
then they drop dead!*

['Bruce']

Wellbeing and cognitive stimulation

- *Last year my partner died. And I didn't know what to do with myself all day. I was just walking around going to the shops. And then I see an advert saying that anyone with time on their hands come up here. ...So I come up and it's the best thing I ever done, come up here. It's well important to me. Otherwise I don't know what I would have done. ['Cliff']*
- *It gives me somewhere to go. Keeps me busy. Keeps my mind off of that [health problems]. Because I've got nothing outside it, you know? So in that way it's a lifeline, you know. I come here I meet normal people, and I just feel better for it. ['Bob']*
- *What I did find though was I was losing words. Not dementia, you know the words that you normally use in a conversation. You think, now what was that word? You forget that word, you know. And it's coming back now because you're chatting and you're using it you know. ['Roy']*
- *You know, it's thinking. Thinking how to do things.Sometimes I'll wake up in the middle of the night and think, 'I know how to do that ...' ['Keith']*

*There are several Shed members who experience memory loss, and dementia or Alzheimer's. ... **The fact of being wanted, and of making a real contribution to something feels really important not just to the men, but also to their wives.** ...Today, Peter and I worked on a small oak shelving unit, ... and literally five minutes after we put it out for sale, we watched it sold. We then worked on an oak aspidistra stand, which, on her return, Jan persuaded Peter to buy for her. Peter was visibly delighted at both events, and Jan was clearly just as pleased. One of the retail staff came in to thank Peter for his work, and **the whole thing felt quite significant**, in terms of the time Peter had spent in the shed, and **as a counter to the frustration which he carries concerning his illness.***

[Co-ordinator Shed 3]

Sense of purpose & self-worth

- *Really the only thing I had control of before I did the sheds was the remote control for the telly. And that was the only thing I ever did, was sat and watched the box and turned to jelly...*

and

It gives you worth. You've got something that you can do. You look forward to going to it. ['Mike']

Inclusion



- *It's the comradeship in this place, that I feel accepted and ... it's a sense of being part of a real community. ['Raymond']*
- *I think because someone's looking at a bench and working at a bench and there's a conversation going around, I think things come out unconsciously, verbally, ... that they wouldn't verbalise otherwise. The workshop activity, I think, is a vehicle for a conversation and integration. ['Roger']*

The importance of gendered spaces?

- *I went to a boys' only school. I was in the Navy which was exclusively men then. I worked in the [production] industry since I left the Navy and that was mainly men. ...and I wonder if part of the reason I'm comfortable with blokes is cause I was most of the life I've been with blokes and I don't know if that's similar for other people or not. ['Jim']*
- *Women, I think, are able to make spaces for themselves easier than men are, because you've got WIs and these sort of things. Women seem to be able to get themselves organised better than we men. ['Don']*
- *My experience is men don't communicate as well as women and it's easier to communicate in an all-male group for many people, than it is in a mixed gender group. ['Roger']*

Ageing and masculinity

'Bruce': *By the time you are 70 you don't want to impress anybody. ... [Friendships with other men are] ... completely different. If you had been doing this 30 or 40 years ago I'd be trying to impress you with who I am. Now I don't give a hang.*

'Jim': *There's no competition. There's no rat race. There's nothing to prove. And people come here in relaxed fashion doing that which they are able to do.*

Concluding comments

- Increasing numbers of lonely and socially isolated older men – present risk for health and wellbeing;
- Provider organisations find it difficult to engage older men in generic non-gender specific social activities;
- Sheds offer gendered spaces in which older men can still perform their masculinity whilst also providing spaces for the promotion and maintenance of health and wellbeing amongst older men;

BUT

As a HEALTH intervention for older men, this appears to work best as 'health by stealth' approach.

