Training provides a SPARK for emerging leaders

Thirty emerging leaders in mental health from across Australia converged in Sydney on the 15th and 16th of June 2016, to learn techniques to translate evidence-informed research and knowledge into effective programs that meet the needs of Australian communities.

Organised by the NSW Mental Health Commission, and sponsored by the National Mental Health Commission, the two-day series of presentations and workshops showed participants how to move innovative ideas in mental health and wellbeing rapidly into practice by fostering strong collaborations across sectors, engaging deeply with stakeholders and learning to summarise their proposal into a one-minute ‘elevator pitch’.

The training was delivered by a six-person delegation from the Mental Health Commission of Canada, led by its Vice President, Programs and Priorities, Ed Mantler, the Director of its Knowledge Exchange Centre, Nicholas Watters, and knowledge exchange specialist Liz Wigfull.

The Canadian Commission developed the training program, known as Supporting the Promotion of Activated Research and Knowledge (SPARK), which was being held for the first time in Australia following successful programs in Canada, the USA and New Zealand.

The new SPARK graduates include early and mid-career leaders in Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing, occupational therapy and psychiatry. Several consumers and carers were among the participants.

They will all attend next year’s International Initiative for Mental Health Leadership (IIMHL) conference, to be hosted in Sydney by the Commission in partnership with the NSW Ministry of Health, where they will apply their new skills in synthesising the expertise and perspectives of up to 400 delegates, about one-third of whom are expected to travel to Sydney from overseas.

“We were delighted to welcome such a diversity of people with exceptional talents, who truly represent the future of the mental health system in Australia. The achievement of the mental health reform plan Living Well in NSW, and other state and national reform agendas, depends on the energy and commitment of people like these new SPARK graduates.”

- John Feneley, NSW Mental Health Commissioner
What is SPARK?
The MHCC’s SPARK Training Program aims to improve the capacity for effective knowledge exchange for people engaged in the mental health, substance use and addiction fields.

The SPARK Training Program is based on the knowledge translation model described in the MHCC’s Innovation to Implementation Guide, known as I2I. It is a practical, skills-building workshop that allows participants to increase their understanding of knowledge translation through presentations and discussions. They then develop their own real-world knowledge translation plans under the tutelage of experienced mentors. Topics include arts-based knowledge translation, working with stakeholders, evaluation strategies, and knowledge translation design.

SPARK in Australia
The two day workshop in Sydney was adapted from the SPARK national two day training program with a focus on emerging leaders. In addition to the I2I which is at the core of the SPARK program, this version also included elements of the Leads in a Caring Environment Framework and Situation-Background-Assessment-Recommendation (SBAR). The Leads framework allowed participants to reflect on leadership skills at all levels (self, team, organisation, system etc.) and the SBAR was used as a tool to effectively pitch an idea for a knowledge translation project.

Evaluation
The effectiveness of the workshop was tested by measuring change in knowledge through a pre-test and post-test. The average score on the pre-test was 4.9/10.

The average score on the post-test, administered at the end of the workshop, was 9.2/10. This indicates a significant increase in knowledge about the I2I and knowledge translation planning.

Opportunities for SPARK graduates at IIMHL
- synthesise the discussion at a match into a summary for the IIMHL website
- work with a video producer to create a video record of a match
- present the discussion and outcomes of a match at the combined meeting
- facilitate small group discussions among diverse participants at the combined meeting

Next steps
- share your experience of SPARK within your own organisation and your professional associations
- join IIMHL - registration is free!
- sign up for a match
- indicate if you are interested in one of the opportunities above

“I really enjoyed the SBAR as a way to clearly articulate a problem and solution.”

“I loved having a mentor at the table. Doing the Knowledge Transition plan was very helpful.”

- SPARK participants