BEYOND MASCULINITY:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MEN’S HELP SEEKING AND HEALTH SERVICE USE IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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For Brooke, Cameron & April

“The more you see the less you know
The less you find out as you go
I knew much more then, than I do now”

City of Blinding Lights - U2
(Song writers/composers - P. Hewson, D. Evans, A. Clayton & L. Mullen, 2004)
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ABSTRACT

Men's help seeking practices and patterns of health service use are significant public health issues in the Western world. However, until recently, there has been little empirical research, particularly qualitative studies, examining how and why men seek help and use health services. In Australia and internationally, this has limited the evidence-base available to inform men's health policy development and service delivery.

In this thesis I investigate lay men's views of their help seeking practices and health service use. I achieve this through an analysis of qualitative interviews conducted with 36 Anglo-Australian men living in North-West Adelaide, South Australia. My analysis adopts a strengths-based approach, consistent with a new public health perspective. This recognises the multiple dimensions of men's lives and explores the intersection between gender and other social aspects of identity that relate to ageing, family, work, previous illness experiences and doctor-patient relationships.

My primary empirical findings are presented as three peer-reviewed journal articles. In the first paper I examine the intersection between ageing and masculinity. I show that independence can be perceived as both a health enhancing and health damaging trait. I argue that traditional masculine traits, such as independence, will not always impact negatively on men's help-seeking practices. Rather, such traits offer opportunities to engage men in health services at particular junctures across their life-course.

In the second paper, I explain how men actively self-monitor their health. My analysis highlights how help-seeking among men is negotiated in the context of social and environmental circumstances that extend beyond, but may relate to, gender. Such factors include prior illness experiences, the ability to maintain regular duties (such as employment), the perceived seriousness of health concerns, and the availability of time. Consideration of these factors can guide the development and implementation of health promotion programs and primary health care services aimed at engaging men.
In the third paper, I explore what the health service interaction looks like when men decide to visit their General Practitioner. I identify five core qualities men value when communicating with general practitioners in primary care settings: the adoption of a frank approach; demonstrable competence; a thoughtful use of humour; empathy; and the prompt resolution of health issues. Health professionals who adopt a patient-centred approach by incorporating the above qualities into their daily practice are regarded by men as providing an environment conducive for men to speak openly about their health.

I conclude my thesis by suggesting that a strengths-based approach provides an alternative way to view and respond to Anglo-Australian men’s help-seeking practices in Australia. I use this approach to explore the implications for men’s health policy development and implementation at a national level, and to suggest strategies that can be used by policymakers to improve men’s engagement in the Australian public health system.
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As with any research study it is customary to acknowledge those who have made the journey a reality. Given that this particular journey has taken over seven years, there are many people to thank. Some have had a direct influence on the research itself, while others have been there to provide emotional support and friendship at times when my motivation has been waning.

When I reflected on my journey I realised that I have held five different jobs, moved house five times (including a move interstate), got married, had a second child, had major eye surgery, had a supervisor leave for the UK (and then return to Australia) and transitioned from full-time to part-time study. There is little surprise that there are many people to thank!!!

I want to start by acknowledging my supervisors. Firstly to Professor Gary Wittert for inviting me to be part of the Florey Adelaide Male Ageing Study while I was working at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. My initial supervision panel comprised of Dr Megan Warin, Associate Professor Jeff Fuller and Gary. Their guidance during the formative stages of the research was invaluable and paved the way for a very interesting interdisciplinary study. While Jeff left (to go to another university) early on, he was aptly replaced by Professor Annette Braunack-Mayer. I have particularly enjoyed Annette’s motherly nature, patience and frank feedback, all of which have ensured that I have followed a logical pathway at times when I may have otherwise veered off-track. This has been balanced against the considered feedback and anthropological gaze of Megan and the encouragement and biomedical gaze of Gary. Combined their supervision has provided a unique entrée into the realm of public health research in the field of men’s health.

I also want to thank each of the 36 participants that took part in the study. This thesis is about representing their views to provide an evidence-base to improve men’s health policy development and implementation in Australia with respect to men’s help-seeking and health service use.

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MANUSCRIPTS CONTRIBUTING TO THIS THESIS

Listed in order of presentation within the thesis:

Published

Published

Published

Published

Published

Published
RATIONALE FOR JOURNAL CHOICE

Choice of journals relating to manuscripts included in this thesis is justified below. National and international peer reviewed journals were chosen. The three articles published in national journals were perceived to have greatest relevance to a domestic audience. In contrast, the three articles published in international journals were perceived to have relevance to a global audience.

The overview of men’s help-seeking scholarship (article one) and the empirical paper relating to core qualities men value when communicating with general practitioners (article four) were both published in the Medical Journal of Australia. This journal has a broad readership consisting of both practitioners and policy-makers. It is published by the Australian Medical Association and claims to be the premier forum for information and commentary on clinical medicine and healthcare in Australia (2006 ISI Impact Factor of 2.582; and 2009 ISI Impact Factor of 3.320).

The commentary article relating to addressing men’s health policy development in Australia (article five) was published in Australia and New Zealand Health Policy. At the time of publication this journal was produced by the Australian Institute of Health Policy Studies. It was a strategic decision to publish in this journal, as it was one of few Australasian publications primarily targeting health policy makers. It was also the only open access journal with a health policy focus in Australia. This meant it was freely accessible to both health policy makers and a broader readership.

Of the articles published in international journals, the first was the empirical paper exploring the intersection between independence, ageing and masculinity in a help-seeking context (article two). This paper was published in the Journal of Aging Studies. This journal publishes original research with a social and/or behavioural sciences orientation. Preference is given to papers that offer new interpretations or which challenge existing theories or empirical work (2007 ISI Impact Factor of 0.667). This paper made a unique and timely contribution to international scholarship about ageing and masculinity. It was subsequently included as part of a collection of papers in a themed issue dedicated to this topic.
The empirical paper examining the way in which men self-monitor their health prior to seeking help and using health services (article three) was published in *BMC Health Services Research*. This journal is an open access journal that publishes original research in all aspects of health services research (2008 ISI Impact Factor of 1.680). The authors considered this paper made a significant contribution to international scholarship and would appeal to the broad readership this journal reaches.

The final paper exploring the differing context in men’s health policy development in Australia, the UK and Ireland (article six) was published in *Critical Public Health*. This is a respected interdisciplinary journal for researchers and practitioners working in public health, health promotion or related fields. It publishes critical analyses of theory, policy and practice and reflects public health debates around the world. The content of this paper was perceived to make an authoritative and timely contribution to international men’s health scholarship and was part of a special edition dedicated to this topic.
AUTHOR DECLARATION

I declare that:

1. This thesis presents work I carried out by myself and does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university;

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James A. Smith (Doctoral Candidate)
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