Case Study: Be sharps smart

Overview
Wagga Wagga City Council’s Health Officers focused on developing and publishing a children's book to increase sharps awareness, helping children across the community to identify incorrectly disposed sharps and take immediate action to step away and notify an adult. Council embarked on a roadshow visiting all interested childcare centres to impart the “be sharps smart” message as well as installing additional sharps bins for community use.

Background
The need for increased sharps awareness and an effective educational resource for children was identified in response to various notifications and media coverage of inappropriately discarded sharps within areas frequented by children including playgrounds and bus shelters.

Extensive research confirmed there was limited information aimed at educating children in sharps awareness. The idea for the Be Sharps Smart children's education resource was proposed to the NSW Ministry of Health, for which Council received a grant of $5,000. Total funding for the project was over $10,000.

The Be Sharps Smart project aimed to:

- engage, educate and help children learn about sharps and actions to followed when sharps are spotted
- help adults gain a better understanding of the reporting process to follow when sharps are found in public spaces
- increase awareness by encouraging broad community participation in the safe disposal of community sharps by providing and promoting accessible community sharps disposal options
- reducing the potential for needle stick injuries to the public and council staff by providing more widely available information, and training and personal protective equipment to staff.
- provide mechanisms for the effective management of sharps in the community to maximise appropriate community sharps disposal and public reduce complaints.

Implementation
The project included two components: a learning resource for children and installation of sharps bins. Project partners formed a working committee to provide advice, which included Department of Education, NSW Ministry of Health, Murrumbidgee Local Health District NSW Police, the local library, Charles Sturt University and the local Drug Action Group.

The target audience for the book was children in the 3 to 12 age group. Council worked closely with a local illustrator to create illustrations based on real settings. The text was prepared by the Council officers and professional editors and local authors were contracted for the final edit. The book was extensively focus tested in the local libraries, at Council's Little Big Day Out and local schools, and launched in September 2017.

The second part of the program was installation of additional sharps bins in more discreet locations that could be accessed from vehicles and those with a disability. This involved site identification, excavation and pouring of concrete pad, and installation of bins, signage and bollards.
Outcomes

The Be Sharps Smart book launch by the Mayor of Wagga Wagga and dignitaries was televised, and the book handed out to over 300 local community members. The book received great community feedback, with Health Officers often greeted by thankful parents for children being wiser about sharps.

The book is available for public use in the National Library of Australia and has been distributed for use across 19 libraries in the Riverina. Books have also been sent interstate (Victoria) and overseas.

Outcomes include:

• Reduction in sharps complaints by 70%
• Increased Facebook likes and hits, and increase in visits to Council's sharps website
• Increase use of community sharps bins and bins positioned in 13 pharmacies
• Well documented Council processes in Health & Safety and Customer Service Teams
• Updated maps on Council's website of all sharps drop off points
• Updated fliers with relevant information
• Roadshows to childcare centres, libraries, play centres and schools
• Behavioural change and improved culture in the community regarding disposing of sharps safely

The long term aim is to have the book used across Australia and overseas. The book is sold at cost to other councils and has been submitted to Environmental Health Australia for endorsement.

Key Learnings

Several challenges were encountered during the 18 month project. The project officer was working in a regulatory and compliance role while working on this project, so time management and lack of experience in drafting and designing a children’s book were challenges.

Ideally the existence of the book would be widely publicised, but the capacity of council staff to do this is limited due to other workloads. However in September 2018 Council staff presented a paper at an Environmental Health Australia forum to encourage Council participation, and also presented at health forums in Wagga and Queanbeyan.

The financial costs of bin installation were also greater than anticipated, given the need to provide a concrete pad, bollards and the ongoing servicing costs. Behavioural issues, such as the public disposing of cans, books and general waste in bins were addressed with extra signage and a media release.

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This project was the 2018 winner of the Community Sharps Management Award at the LGNSW Excellence in the Environment Awards