

2006 Public Health Awards for Excellence and Innovation:

Public Health Programs Award for Innovation

Mental Health First Aid

ORYGEN Research Centre, University of Melbourne

In our daily life, it is far more likely that we will encounter someone who needs help for a mental health problem than someone who needs to be given CPR for a cardiac arrest. Mental Health First Aid is a training program which teaches members of the general public how to recognise the symptoms of mental health problems, how to provide initial help, and how to go about guiding a person towards appropriate professional and self-help. The course is analogous to conventional first aid courses, but covers mental health crisis situations and developing mental health problems. The course is 12-hours long and is run by trained instructors from the local community. There are instructors in every state and territory of Australia, employed by health areas, non-government organisations, places of employment or working in private practice. Versions of the course have been developed for Australians of Vietnamese, Croatian and Italian backgrounds. An indigenous version is currently under development. The course has spread to several other countries: Scotland, Ireland, Finland, Hong Kong, Singapore, Canada and USA.

The course is closely integrated with a research program. Several studies have been carried out to evaluate the course, including randomized controlled trials in a workplace setting and in a rural area. A qualitative study has been carried out collecting first aiders' stories of how they have used skills taught in the course. Work is currently underway to develop standards for mental health first aid, using consensus of professionals, consumers and carers.

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