



NSPs & INNOVATION

Innovation is a concept that is used in a range of sectors and settings - in private business and medical care, including community and primary health care. According to the Australian Government, 'Innovation is about ideas, and the transformation of those ideas into value creating outcomes - into products, processes and services.' Innovation can include inspirational ideas that result in the development of new products and services. They can also include ideas that improve 'the way processes are undertaken, or products are manufactured.'

Twenty years ago, in the public health field, Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) could be described as an innovation - the product of ideas about HIV prevention among injecting drug users. As NSPs continue to deliver services to their clients, there have been many instances of innovation within the sector. There have been new products and services, new ways of delivering services resulting from ongoing reflection and evaluation of how things could be done better.

According to John Ryan, CEO of Anex, 'We need to recognise and encourage NSPs' ability to seek out new ideas and adopt fresh perspectives so that we can be innovative and keep up with the changing environment around us.'

Sonia Berton, CEO of Arbias (a specialist provider in the area of alcohol and substance related brain injury) agrees. Writing for the *Community Management* magazine, she suggests that 'one of the most risky decisions an organisation can make is not to innovate. In an environment where demand for services and legislative and policy requirements are constantly changing, to remain stagnant is a highly risky position to take.'

But what exactly is innovation?

Sonia suggests that 'It is about adding value to what you are already doing.' It does not need to be time consuming and costly. It might

be about developing new processes for client service delivery, providing a new service, gaining new skills to provide better services, or finding new ways to use existing products, services and processes.

Innovation can be applied to all aspects of an organisation, whether big or small. Sonia believes that 'it need not be formal but it should be about creating a culture within the setting in which you work. It's about a way of thinking which becomes part of that culture. No matter where you sit, what you do assists in creating that culture.'

For many people, innovation is associated with taking risks, but it does not have to be. Being innovative is a process of reflecting and evaluating. 'It is a continual process of questioning the way you work and asking yourself if you could do this better to achieve better outcomes for your clients,' Sonia says.

She continues, 'They [the clients] are why you innovate. Your clients are the purpose of innovation. Ideally you innovate to add value to what you do and the services that you offer your clients.'

According to Anex Training Coordinator Brad Pearce, 'It's about not accepting that what we are doing at a day-to-day level is good enough just because it seems to be working. It's about looking at other options, finding different ways of engaging with service users. Most importantly

you need to be willing to have a go while being realistic about the resources that you have available.'

Adopting a culture that values innovation can result in change. As John Ryan suggests: 'When we realise that we can do things better and act upon it, we start to do things differently. But this does not necessarily mean that the changes need to be major earth-shattering situations. Small and incremental changes can have a huge positive effect for clients.'

In her article in *Community Management* magazine, Sonia warns against the mentality of 'change for change's sake.' She notes that 'If it doesn't add value, then it is not innovation.'

The process of adopting an innovative idea and transforming it into an outcome can be challenging. Innovation can be limited by a number of factors such as an organisation's culture, structure, leadership and resources. Limited time and money have often been cited as reasons innovations do not occur. Beyond these are the broader structural constraints of

political priorities and community expectations. Part and parcel of the innovation process is determining how we can operate successfully within these constraints.

According to John Ryan: 'Innovation is about adapting old and new ideas. It is underpinned by seeking to maximise the benefits for our clients. Innovation is also about integrating research, evaluation and practice. In promoting innovation, we need to recognise that we cannot work in isolation. Recognising the factors that can limit our capacity to innovate, we need to work collaboratively with others within our own organisations as well as those outside to generate support for our ideas, and to ensure that it is driven by our collective knowledge, experience and expertise.'

The establishment of NSPs in Australia 20 years ago is a good illustration of the need for collaboration and partnerships to turn innovative ideas into outcomes. The success of NSPs would not have been possible without the collective effort of many people, including politicians from all major parties, police, health professionals, researchers and community leaders.

Twenty years later, the imperative for innovation remains.

'In many parts of the health sector, achieving better health outcomes has been the driver for innovation. Better diagnostic tools in the medical setting, and the development of best practice in primary health care and in community health are some examples of innovation. It is a core element of the health care field, and NSPs need to continue to be innovative to prevent us sliding into irrelevancy,' says John Ryan.

Anex Innovations

Anex recognises the importance of adopting innovative approaches to our work whether it be in delivering workforce development opportunities, undertaking research or facilitating communication within the sector. p.4

SHARP SMART

Innovation will mean different things to different people, but at its core innovation is about improving outcomes for NSP clients. Here are some top tips for thinking about innovation at your service. p.5

NSPs: 20 years of success

In November 1986, Australia's first unofficial Needle and Syringe Program (NSP) began operation at the Alcohol and Drug Service, St Vincent's Hospital, Darlinghurst, New South Wales. Since then more than 3000 NSP outlets have been established across Australia. p.6

Case studies

In this edition of the Anex Bulletin we highlight the importance of innovation in NSPs. These case studies showcase a number of innovations in NSPs. They demonstrate that innovation in the NSP workplace takes a variety of forms, from the very big to the very small. p.8