

## ICAN celebrates a healthy first birthday

About 150 Evans Head residents and a community of volunteers celebrated ICAN's first birthday party in November, which also included the presentation of community awards, a stroll along the Evans River, and a healthy sausage sizzle and giant birthday cake (low fat of course).

ICAN Evans Head was established last November as part of a Commonwealth-funded initiative aimed at reducing and preventing chronic disease in small rural communities. The pilot project aimed to help establish a community group to promote healthy lifestyles in the town that would be sustainable once the funding period was over.

"We are really pleased at how ICAN captured the imagination of the Evans community," said Catherine Johnson, project officer for the Northern Rivers Division of General Practice, which auspiced the project.

"ICAN aims to raise people's awareness of their ability to improve their own health and prevent chronic disease by being more physically active, eating a healthier diet, increasing social interaction and recognising the early warning signs of disease and seeking assistance."

Due to the success of the various projects such as the walking groups, pedometer program, healthy eating courses and community noticeboard, and the enthusiasm of the volunteer members, Catherine said that ICAN would continue as a local not-for-profit organisation under the auspices of the Mid-Richmond Neighbourhood Centre.

"We are very keen to have input from anyone in the community about what they believe is needed in Evans Head and how we can go about obtaining that. At this stage we are seeking funding to employ a co-ordinator to maintain the momentum of the various projects."

Contact ICAN on email [ICAN@mrnc.com](mailto:ICAN@mrnc.com), post to ICAN c/o Mid-Richmond Neighbourhood Centre, Evans

Head, or phone 6682 4999.

### Achievements of ICAN

Over the last 12 months ICAN has been involved in many local projects:

- ~ Walking for pleasure groups, nature walks, stroller friendly walks;
- ~ Pedometer program (step counter available from local GPs);
- ~ Healthy heart risk screening days;
- ~ Resuscitation training (CPR);
- ~ Healthy eating and cooking courses;
- ~ Budgeting courses;
- ~ Building of community noticeboard;
- ~ Promotion of various physical activity/lifestyle classes;
- ~ Lifestyle modification education and health awareness articles in local newspaper and on local radio.

A number of other projects are currently in the development stage including:

- ~ Construction of fitness stations at the Recreation Oval;
- ~ Installation of fitballs at the CTC;
- ~ Development of a town map with walking trails and exercise locations;
- ~ Lifeball;
- ~ Fruit and vegetable education for children;
- ~ Risky behaviour modification program for adolescents.

*ICAN Evans Head (Integrated Community Action Network), is a volunteer community group working to improve the health of the community. Many partnerships have developed and continue to develop; including with the Mid-Richmond Neighbourhood Centre, the Evans Head Medical Centre, Ambulance Service NSW, Richmond Valley Council, Community Health, Dirawong Reserve Trust, Northern Rivers Area Health Service, Stay Active Stay Independent, Dept. of Sport & Recreation, and Pippies Cafe, to name a few. These partnerships help develop and build a stronger community and assist in providing and improving services to the community.*



*Happy birthday ICAN Evans Head!*

Think active.  
Think tai chi.

*Tai Chi for Health and Wellbeing* is a simple exercise program enabling people to enjoy the many benefits of an ancient system of physical and mental

wellbeing. Tai chi was originally developed as a martial art form in ancient China, but nowadays it is practiced throughout the world as an exercise for health.

A Sydney doctor, Dr Paul Lam, has developed several forms of tai chi that are ideal for beginners and suitable for people with ailments such as arthritis and diabetes. They are slow in tempo with the gentle movement of joints, muscles and tendons throughout the body. Breathing is deepened, aiding mental concentration, relaxing the body and allowing the life force (or 'Qi' as the body's life-energy is known) to flow unimpeded throughout the body.

Tai chi does not require expensive equipment, special clothing, and is not weather dependent. It can be practised almost anywhere, by anyone, with the level of exertion adjusted to suit each person's physical condition. It is short in duration, yet benefits almost all aspects of wellbeing.

CHEGS (Community Health Education Groups) is offering Dr Lam's *Tai Chi for Health and Wellbeing* in the Northern Rivers area as part of its healthy lifestyles program. CHEGS tai chi instructors draw on an extensive background within the health and fitness fields.

*Tai Chi for Health and Wellbeing* beginners' courses will start in February in most North Coast centres. The cost of the 10-week course is \$40. For more information contact CHEGS coordinator, Mary Ward, on 6620 7523.

*CHEGS is a non-profit, self-funding organisation supported by the Northern Rivers Area Health Service.*



## Parents to be able to access teens' health info

The division's adolescent health GP project advisor, Rob Trigger, has expressed concern about the Federal Government's plans to grant parents access to their children's Medicare records.

The Government is developing legislation to give parents access on request to all information held by the Health Insurance Commission concerning their children aged under 16 years.

Dr Trigger is urging the Federal Government not to prevent teenagers under 16 years from obtaining their own Medicare card and to allow GPs a right to confidential health care with their young patients.

"There's a strong evidence base to maintain confidentiality to minors. I'm concerned that removing confidentiality could be particularly damaging to some young people," Dr Trigger, a GP in Byron Bay, said.

The government says it believes that, in the ordinary course of events, parents should have a right to access information about their children, especially when it



Dr Rob Trigger

relates to their children's health and welfare. Parents' right of access to their children's Medicare records should apply irrespective of whether children have their own Medicare card.

"Compared to many other age groups, current statistics suggest that minors access GPs poorly, despite a disproportionate amount of need and disease burden in

this age group. Many young people who go to see the GP are well adjusted and are happy to have their parents involved in the consultation. However, significant numbers of minors under the age of sixteen who need to see a GP would not come if they could not access confidential care. Many local, national and international surveys of young people identify access to confidential health care as a major barrier for young people in seeking a GP."

Dr Trigger says that examples of the health issues that young people may not initially wish to involve their parents or guardians include mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders, sexual health issues, drug and alcohol use and other risk taking behav-

our.

"A good GP is skilled to make a clear assessment of the maturity of young person and decide whether the best health outcome for that young person would be to include parental or guardian involvement or not. As GPs are often seen by young people as more objective, once a trusting relationship has been developed then the GP may be able to persuade the young person to involve their parents or guardian. Often the need for the young person to want this confidential health care relates to their stage of development in discovering their own independence, and also difficulties in communication in the family unit.

Dr Trigger says the proposed legislation could serve to marginalise further those young people 'at risk' who are already estranged from their families and who need access to medical attention, screening and medicine, to treat or prevent health and wellbeing problems.

"If this legislation goes through, young people's healthcare will be compromised in my opinion," Dr Trigger said.

He encourages young people to visit their local GP if they have concerns about their emotional or physical health.

## Chair welcomes many of MedicarePlus initiatives

*Dr Tony Lembke, chair of the NRDGP, welcomed many of the new initiatives announced recently in the Government's proposed MedicarePlus package, which will be considered by the Senate when it resumes in February.*

"This is a significant advance over the initial package proposed by the government, and many of the measures will improve the provision of health services in our area. The new safety net provisions for out of pocket expenses will be of great benefit to those unfortunate families with severe or frequent episodes of illness."

Dr Lembke welcomed the increased recognition of the medical needs of residents of aged care facilities, and new Medicare items for services performed by practice nurses, reflecting the importance of their role in providing comprehensive family care.

He also welcomed the focus on the training and recruitment of more GPs to work in regional centres, warning howev-

er that the increasing shortage of GPs to service rural communities would remain the most important issue restricting equitable access to health services.

"More training places for rural GPs and encouragement of those GPs who provide more advanced procedural skills are good proposals. I am concerned that in the short term the government continues to rely on doctors trained overseas to fill the gaps in our services. These doctors provide excellent care - and so it seems most unfair to attract doctors here from other countries where the demand for their service is even more acute."

The increased Medicare benefits in the package were unlikely to make a sustained difference to bulkbilling rates in this area, Dr Lembke said.

"Increasing the patient rebate for children and concession card holders is most appropriate - however the increase only applies if the service is bulkbilled, so would be of no benefit to most patients in rural areas. Even at the increased rate, the rebate does not cover the costs

involved in running an accredited practice, and without indexation would again fall behind cost rises. By increasing the patient rebate only for bulkbilled services we run the risk of increasing the disparity between urban and rural spending on Medicare."

"When a visit is not bulkbilled, the announced refund of the patient rebate directly into a patient's bank account has already been available in some areas. It still seems an inefficient system, where patients pay the full cost of a service, and receive their rebate some time later in their account. It would be much better for families if they could pay only the 'gap'."

Overall the package provides some important benefits for this region, and is welcomed for this. It seems unlikely to redress the continuing inequity of Medicare spending between city and rural areas, and is unlikely to decrease the cost to the patient of visits to the GP.

**FEEDBACK:** We value your feedback. If you would like to make the division aware of any ideas for possible health projects, or if you have comments on any of our current projects, please call us on 6622 4453, or email [media@nrdgp.org.au](mailto:media@nrdgp.org.au). Thank you.