

executive summary

This is a report on the Neami Splash Art Studio Evaluation September 2002 to January 2003 – The Secret Life of Splash: putting words to a visual experience. The overall aim of this evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of Splash's service delivery for people living with severe and enduring mental health issues.

The methodological approach to this evaluation involved a detailed set of data collection implemented by a consultant who worked four months part-time on site at the studio.

key findings

The findings of this review highlighted a committed, united and passionate team of staff, working within a clear set of values that were apparent in the way they approached their work with consumers. Splash's service delivery was found to be of high quality and consistently able to provide good consumer-focused outcomes.

Splash received high praise from consumers and other key stakeholders alike about the success of the model in consumers' lives. The strengths of Splash were reportedly many. The most important aspect of the model for consumers is reported to be the opportunities this service provides. These were reflected in the comments people made about what they liked most about Splash:

"Being able to be mindless, forgetting everything. Learning new things – there's so much to art – more than what you think there is. You get encouraged to have your own ideas and you're told you're good at something."

"Meeting new friends and having people who want to help who are good people. Everybody helps one another. This is a good place for me to express myself."

"Going to Splash is like having freedom of speech – draw what you want – they won't tell you what to draw or how to do it – they'll say try this or try that and you may not know what you want at the start but generally things start to look really rosy and bright."

"It makes you feel like you can do something. People don't tell you what to do – people do what they want to do and there's help if you want it."

"Exhibitions and meeting people. Being noticed through my artwork. Lots of opportunities."

A number of important findings for this evaluation involve the articulation of the 'uniqueness' of Splash's model of service delivery. This evaluation found that:

— Splash's arts-based practice service delivery model is unique from and complementary to clinical support, PDSS day programmes, groups and outreach supports.

— Two of the critical ingredients in the Splash service delivery model are that Splash is a dedicated space that is an art studio and that all the staff at the studio are practising artists.

— The model is arts-based practice overlaid with a reflective practice approach to service delivery – in a small, close teamwork environment.

— What Splash is providing for people living with severe and enduring mental health issues is sought after and scarce. There is general consensus amongst stakeholders that there aren't enough services providing the kinds of opportunities and possibilities that Splash does.

— It is clear from the range of key stakeholders interviewed that Splash's approach is successful in delivering important consumer outcomes. Stakeholders were clear that what Splash provides is important and is part of the balance of things that enable people living with severe and enduring mental health issues to maximise their recovery and wellbeing. The key stakeholders are clear that what Splash offers people is unique from other mental health services and that this difference is a key ingredient worth identifying and developing.

— The model of arts-based practice is not well documented and not well understood universally. While people who have experienced arts-based practice have an understanding of what it achieves, other people commonly make a range of incorrect assumptions about art and health. Art in a healthcare setting is commonly understood as art therapy. Art therapy and arts-based practice are fundamentally different models. The two models have some cross over in outcomes but the intent, the process by which outcomes are achieved and the scope of outcomes varies significantly. Splash is offering the opportunity for people to self-determine how they use art. At Splash people are gaining the power of self-knowledge. An individual may acquire new skills without schooling, people do find themselves doing things they didn't know they could. Splash strives to provide the possibilities and opportunities through arts-based practice to energise people to participate in life. Given the challenge this project has experienced to articulate the arts-based practice model, the question remaining at the closure of this evaluation project: Is an understanding of arts-based practice necessarily experiential?

— Splash's approach is to continually work at exploring ways to actively assist people to develop connections and experience being part of the community. Splash projects create the greatest range of possibilities for people to work together, problem solve, share, contribute, connect and experience an interconnectedness with others. Projects also provide participants with a shared history and common experience. Many of the projects Splash undertakes involves partnerships with other organisations and many are community-based. These projects create possibilities for connections that vary greatly from project to project and from individual to individual. It is clear that the lasting effect for an individual in participating at Splash cannot and should not be underestimated.

— The partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) has been crucial to Splash working with the local Indigenous community and developing an accessible and culturally appropriate service. The Koori Art Programme is a distinctive part of the services Splash offers. Many important lessons learned from the Koori Art Programme and the partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service have been transferred into the overall practice at Splash and have enhanced Splash's capacity to achieve good outcomes for individuals across the service.

