Learn More: About “Fear and Shame” and the Macedonian Mental Health Project

**Fear and Shame**

This program is based around “Fear and Shame” a Macedonian language play which creatively explores mental illness and stigma. The program uses key scenes, translated into English, to highlight the experiences of a Macedonian family struggling to come to terms with the youngest son Alex’s schizophrenia.

The play is set in Rockdale in the southern suburbs of Sydney and shows the challenges encountered by the family as they seek help for Alex and face the negative reactions of their friends and neighbours. Many issues that impact on mental health in the Macedonian community are also explored such as domestic violence, alcoholism, social isolation, unemployment, inter-generational conflict and substance abuse.

The script was written by Dushan Ristevski. It was based on qualitative research conducted with the Macedonian community in 2003 and Dushan’s experiences as a Macedonian bilingual mental health counsellor at St George Mental Health Service. It was developed with assistance from the St George Division of Mental Health, South Eastern Sydney Multicultural Health Service and the Australia Council. The script was published in both Macedonian and English in partnership with the Macedonian Literary Association.

The play was staged by the Australian Macedonian Theatre of Sydney. There were eight performances in three locations over a period of seven months. Venues were chosen in areas with large numbers of Macedonian residents, namely Rockdale, Hurstville and Wollongong. Approximately 1600 people attended a performance.

The script is available in English from: Dushan.Ristevski@sesiahs.health.nsw.gov.au

DVDs of “Fear and Shame” in Macedonian are available from: Dushan.Ristevski@sesiahs.health.nsw.gov.au

**Macedonian Mental Health Project**

This project commenced in 2002 in response to observations of the local Macedonian community such as:
- high levels of stigma associated with mental illness
- low levels of health service utilization
- high use of acute, hospital services rather than community based services
- a strong reluctance to attend family group education sessions conducted in Macedonian

Phase 1 comprised a research project conducted in 2002/03 with 100 consumers, carers and community members. It revealed higher than expected levels of stigma within the community. Findings identified that Macedonians regarded their community as cruel and discriminatory with regards to mental illness. People with mental illness were viewed as having a personal failure or weakness and Macedonians felt they were unable to openly discuss mental illness in the community for fear of censure. A community education program followed (Phase 2) however it was felt that there was a still a significant amount of work required to change community attitudes.

Phase 3 adopted a theatre-based approach as a culturally appropriate way of generating further discussion within the community and increasing knowledge and awareness of mental illness. Macedonians have a long history of involvement in theatre with thriving community drama groups in Sydney, Wollongong and Melbourne.

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“Fear and Shame” was evaluated in 2009 in relation to (1) community reach and community engagement (2) appropriateness of this medium for raising awareness in the community and (3) impact on attitudes to mental illness. Results indicated that the play successfully sparked a community conversation about mental illness and stigma and that the key messages of the play were well received.

Comparing the time after the play was staged to the 2003 baseline data:
- Community attitudes towards mental illness were more positive
- There was a reduction in the stigma in the community surrounding mental illness
- The community had improved knowledge of mental health services
- Community members demonstrated increased help-seeking behaviours in relation to mental health problems

Connecting with Carers from CALD backgrounds represents phase 4 of the project and focuses on building the capacity of mental health services to deliver culturally competent care.

References
