

Not drowning, waving: water games keep hopes buoyant

Increasing participation in physical activity through community sport and active recreation

This project is part of a VicHealth funding program known as PICSAR, which aims to increase participation levels in community sport and active recreation amongst people with disabilities and those from low socio-economic, Indigenous and new arrival communities.

The organisation

State Sporting Association, Victorian Water Polo Incorporated (VWPI) is a non-government, not-for-profit body dedicated to the strategic growth of water polo in Victoria. VWPI values sport and physical recreation participation as an appropriate way of facilitating improved physical health and mental wellbeing. Their mission is to assist Victoria in becoming the premier water polo state, through growth, promotion, the sustainable pursuit of excellence and the provision of opportunities for participation for all Victorian communities.

The project

This project provides the underlying strategic direction for developing and adapting the Flippa Ball™ program across communities. Flippa Ball™ increases participation and healthy practices in the sport across a variety of demographics. Flippa Ball™ is being adapted through rule modification, research and consultation with peak bodies and targeted groups to produce inclusive practices for recreational and competitive water polo. Partnerships are being developed with leading agencies including local government, Sports Medicine Australia – Vic and Leisure Networks.



Mashi Durzada from AMES Footscray having a ball with Flippa Ball™. Image courtesy of Robert Keeley.

Greater participation through greater understandings

The story

A four-week water polo program saw Victorian Water Polo's understanding of newly-arrived/culturally and linguistically diverse communities develop considerably.

The program implementation was a partnership between AMES (Adult Multicultural Education Services) Footscray, Spirit West Services (SWS) – the education, training and community

development division of the Western Bulldogs Football Club – and VWPI.

Initially, Julie Makohon, VWPI's sports development officer sat down with new partner, SWS, to introduce water polo's Flippa Ball™ program. As SWS works closely with Ethiopian, Chin, Burmese and Vietnamese communities, discussions centred around how the program could specifically benefit people from these communities.

More information about Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) is available on the VicHealth website at: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/picsar

This meeting turned out to be a major learning experience for all involved. For Julie, many new cultural issues associated with water were revealed. Namely, in Australia swimming pools and open water are usually associated with fun and recreation. In contrast to this, many of the prospective participants were from newly-arrived communities and had a traumatic relationship with water. For them, water was associated with fear, fleeing, drowning and torture. To add to this, many of the group had never seen a swimming pool, let alone been in one.

The project began with an introductory classroom session at AMES Footscray where potential participants were introduced to the sport by VWPI. Even after SWS explained the kind of challenges to be expected, Julie believes she never truly grasped the depth and extent of the challenges until this session.

Except for two, the participants had never seen or heard of water polo before. Language barriers resulted in explanatory resources not being fully comprehended. A water polo DVD was not effective as the concept of having 'fun' and playing games in the water was not an understood or known one.

VWPI quickly realised that they had to rethink how they were going to deliver this program to the target group. It had to be implemented in a completely different way as this group had a very different relationship with water. As all the participants were still in the process of learning basic English, the traditional verbal and written communications also needed to be reviewed.

As a result of these learnings, the program was modified. The initial stages of the program now focus on an introduction to water rather than an introduction to water polo as a sport. This new focus includes splashing, water games and becoming familiar with just being in a pool. The introduction to the sport is now through various components of Flippa Ball™.

VWPI believes even though the program focus is narrower and the process much slower, the result is more appealing and welcoming to participants.

VWPI learnt that the most valuable part of the program is not in its implementation but in something they didn't foresee. That is, Flippa Ball™ can help people overcome fears and barriers to participation that can extend into other areas of their life while also promoting a positive connection to the sport. It is a switch of focus from sport to general wellbeing.

For more information contact
Victorian Water Polo at
info@vicwaterpolo.com.au,
www.vicwaterpolo.com.au or
telephone: (03) 9926 1552

PICSAR

Sport and active recreation organisations are well placed to assist VicHealth in addressing the health inequalities that result in poorer health outcomes for many groups in the community.

They have a tradition of providing opportunities for individuals and groups to:

- participate in physical activity,
- connect with other members of the community,
- feel part of their local community, and
- develop knowledge and skills that can be used in a range of contexts.

The Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) Program comprises three funding programs:

- State and Regional Grants
- Active Participation Grants
- Active Club Grants

The first two programs are long-term investments that work with State Sporting Associations, Regional Sports Assemblies, statewide peak agencies and regional organisations to increase participation in physical activity in specific target populations.

A learning snapshot from the independent evaluation being conducted by Monash University/ ARTD Consultants shows that:

1. partnerships are perceived as beneficial to program delivery
2. it is important that staff (paid or voluntary) have the required skills to implement activities
3. sports at all levels should consider adapting policies and activities to provide greater flexibility to promote inclusion.