

media monitoring

date: Thursday 18 November 2010

media: The Mercury

The Mercury

Stigma seen as crux of mental ills

MEGAN McNAUGHT

TASMANIA needs to take a new approach to mental health that encourages acceptance and understanding within the broader community, says a visiting expert.

Leading British health consultant Gregor Henderson believes stigma is still a major problem facing people with mental health issues in Tasmania.

Speaking at the Richmond Fellowship Asia-Pacific Regional Conference at Wrest Point yesterday, Mr Henderson said although perceptions were shifting, people with mental illness often felt isolated by the community.

This caused them to deteriorate further before asking for help, adding to the emotional and financial burden of mental illness on the community.

He said many had the perception that mental illness was dangerous, catching and "you don't want it happening to you".

"But the exact opposite is true" — if one in six people suffer a mental health issue in Australia then we are burying something that is already among us," Mr Henderson said.

He said Tasmania needed anti-stigma campaigns and recovery programs for sufferers and should give people who experienced mental health problems more autonomy over their lives.

School-based programs that taught students how to cope with stresses of modern life had proved successful overseas.

"The sooner people get help



ACCEPTANCE KEY:
Gregor Henderson

the sooner they recover, but what stops them seeking help sooner is the fear of the discrimination and stigma they will get from family, friends, colleagues," Mr Henderson said.

Les Harding has suffered from anxiety and depression for most of his life.

He spent 15 years in an institution and said the isolation from society exacerbated his condition.

It was only when he moved to the Richmond Fellowship residence at Rokeby and interacted with the community again that he began to improve.

These days he participates in art, gardening and other community programs and says dealing with people face to face is the highlight of his day.

"I still have my ups and downs but there are days when I feel good now," said Mr Harding, 52.



FEELING BETTER NOW: Anxiety sufferer Les Harding, 52, of Rokeby, says isolation exacerbated his condition.
Picture: RAOUL KOCHANOWSKI

Richmond Fellowship Tasmania CEO Patrick Carlisle said 54 people now lived in the organisation's five residences where they were shown everything from how to use

an ATM to catching a bus, visiting the doctor and conducting relationships.

But the stigma met from the broader community was hindering their recovery.

"Part of their recovery is experiencing being back in the community, but if the community is not accepting that it creates real problems," Mr Carlisle said.