

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIFESTYLE COURSES

For some time the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia (VVAA) had been concerned that there were limited preventative treatment available for veterans suffering from anxiety disorders and or alcoholism, and who were approaching a stage where they were unable to work or participate in normal activities.

In 1992, the National President of the VVAA, John Methven, and the Deputy Commissioner of Veterans Affairs in Victoria, Bryan Flynn, arranged a number of meetings with members of the VVAA who were involved in the welfare of veterans, to discuss these problems. These meetings also included Dr Bill Adam, Executive Director, Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital and the then Victorian Director of Counselling of the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service (VVCS), Ruth Dunn.

Discussions centred on problems in management of Vietnam veterans with stress and or alcoholism which were seen as arising from three different groups of veterans:

- (a) those veterans with chronic alcoholism,
- (b) those whose stress leads to a dependence on alcohol and
- (c) those who had stress as their major problem.

It was considered that the management of veterans in (a) and (b) above could be addressed by improving existing services but the veterans in (c) needed a new approach.

These veterans may have been coping with work but were heading towards a problem and needed help before they reached a major crisis. It was believed that a major gain could be achieved if veterans attended a 7 day residential workshop that concentrated on teaching coping and self help skills. Further gains could also be achieved if partners could attend the course. This idea was adopted and has proved to be an essential and valuable component.

The draft program was designed by John Methven, with input from Richard Culliford, the then State president of the VVAA, and John Printz, the National Secretary of the VVAA.

The principles underlying the course were strongly supported by the deputy Commissioner whose efforts secured funding for a pilot course in August 1993.

The draft program was developed into a professional program by Helga Erlanger, the current Victorian Director of Counselling, VVCS, and Nic Fothergill, VVCS counsellor who is also a veteran. The veterans' input was maintained by John Methven. Following the successful evaluation of the first course, national funding was provided in November 1994 for further courses.

At the time of production of this manual, 12 courses have been conducted in Victoria and courses are being conducted in all states in Australia. In addition, the Vietnam Veterans of America has shown interest in this Australian innovation by extending an invitation to present a workshop at their convention in August 1997.

John Methven Past President – National VVAA June 1997