

EXPO SHEDS LIGHT ON MENTAL HEALTH

By Rachel Loveday

The first Mental Health Awareness expo in Wollongong was successful in shedding a light on mental illness on Tuesday.

The expo was held at the City Beach Function Centre and was organised by the recently established Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI) and South Eastern Sydney Illawarra Health Service.

The expo united those affected by mental illness as well as uniting a wide number of health professional to network and exchange information.

All of the health professionals present believed that the expo was important in informing the public that there is support available to those in need.

“Any awareness is good awareness,” Claire Leslie, of Lifeline South Coast said.

“(Mental Illness) is a difficult issue and for some people, the difficulty for them is finding the right service for their needs,” she said.

Some other health professionals believed that the expo also provided a safe and supportive environment for those in need to get the support and information that they needed.

“The expo provides a non-confronting environment of support for those affected by mental health, a lot of good networking is happening as well as referrals,” Bianca Hoban of SHARP (Student Health Alliance for Rural Populations) said.

As well as information tables for multiple health services, there were also three guest speakers; former international rugby player, CEO and founder of the Topo Foundation for Education; Enrique (Topo) Rodriguez, Mental Health advocate; John Strang and Student; Summah McKinnon.

Mr Rodriguez, Mr Strang and Miss McKinnon shared their own individual and unique experiences with mental illness, however they all heavily emphasised the importance of public awareness, education, support and communication.

“We need to educate people about their illness and medication, we’re not doing this enough,” Mr Strang, who spoke about his experiences with Schizophrenia, said.

“There was no awareness of mental issues twenty-five years ago, it wasn’t like what it is today.”

“We need to talk, we need to communicate,” Mr Rodriguez, who shared his experiences with Bipolar Disorder said.

“By talking about it (mental illness) and helping other people, I was also helping myself.”

Miss McKinnon, who was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder in 2004 and is also a client of Headspace, heavily emphasised the need for individual effort in order to overcome the obstacles that mental illness can present.

“I had to understand that my lifestyle had to change and that being healthy physically would really help me mentally.”

More than 20 health professionals and services were present, which included; Lifeline South Coast, Headspace, Uniting Care Ageing, Barnardos and Mission Australia to provide information and contact details.