Expanded school-based health services making a difference

Teenage boys can be tight-lipped and keep their feelings and emotions to themselves. Tairawhiti District Health public health nurse Sarah Brown uses a little humour to encourage them to open up during health and wellbeing assessments as part of School Based Health Services (SBHS).

‘A bit of a laugh normalises things, releases tension and helps me to relate to the student and find that common ground.’

Sarah has been working at Gisborne Boys’ High School, checking on the health and wellbeing of its year 9 students using the HEEADSSS wellness assessment as part of the Prime Minister’s Youth Mental Health Project.

SBHS helps improve student access to a range of health services. A HEEADSSS assessment is carried out for all year 9 students. This helps assess youth wellbeing through a series of questions relating to home, education/employment, eating, activities, drugs, sexuality, suicide and depression, and safety (HEEADSSS). Any medical or mental health issues can be identified at an early stage, and students can be referred for treatment.

Sarah says there are some challenging subjects to discuss with the boys during the assessment, and they can be nervous when they first arrive.
‘They look a bit tense at the start, but by the end of our session, they are sitting much more comfortably because the fear has gone.’

Assistant Principal Tom Cairns, who is also the First XV rugby coach and a former student, says that the HEEADSSS assessments for year 9 students are making a difference to student welfare.

‘We take the pastoral care of our boys very seriously and had no hesitation in coming on board with this service. We’ve asked the boys, and they tell us that the assessments are a good thing to do. So it’s been a positive thing for our school.’

Tom says that two students are getting help to quit smoking; new glasses are being arranged for a couple of other boys; and just recently, a student who was frequently absent from school has begun attending more regularly.

Sarah carries out a medical check for each student that includes assessing height, weight and blood pressure. Then she and the student talk about hearing, vision, dental health and any recent visits to the doctor. Sarah then introduces more difficult topics, such as sexuality and drugs. ‘If I do it in that order, they begin to relax and I can bring in questions around tobacco, alcohol, self-harm and anything else that might be happening.’

Sarah treats students’ comments seriously, and the discussion is confidential. When a student needs extra support, such as for anxiety or low mood, Sarah can refer them to a GP, school counsellor or external support service.

Gisborne Boys’ High School student Liam Boyle enjoys BMX riding, soccer, playing guitar and listening to heavy metal music. He says talking with Sarah was easy, and although he was a bit nervous at the start, he didn’t mind her queries.

‘It wasn’t a big deal. My mates had already done it, and it turned out alright because they can track what’s happening and they can come in and help.’ Liam, who is short-sighted, reckons the assessment was a good reminder for him to wear his glasses more often – ‘It makes life easier and stops any headaches.’

Sarah says that the decile 3 school has a strong reputation for looking after its boys and has embraced the HEEADSSS assessments, making her job much easier.

‘Tapping into students in Gisborne early is the key. We can see what is going on for someone and help them out before a little issue becomes a big issue. It’s a great service.’

What we expect to see

- The nurses will help students access relevant primary health services, provide youth development checks and refer students who present with mental health problems.
- Nurses will use the HEEADSSS wellness assessment, which is also being promoted to all health care practitioners.
- Young people will receive appropriate and timely referrals to improve their health and education outcomes.

Background

The Prime Minister’s Youth Mental Health Project was launched in 2012 as a 4-year phased package of 22 initiatives, which has since expanded.

The current 26 initiatives are focused on 12- to 19-year-olds and aim to help prevent the development of mental health issues and improve young people’s access to services if concerns are identified.

The project seeks to reach young people in the key settings of families and communities, schools, health services and online.

For more information, go to: www.health.govt.nz/youthmentalhealthproject