

# Chapter 8

---



# The utility of Cancer Council seminars for community health professionals, 1999

---

**Lisa Trotter, Madeline Fernbach and Suzanne Dobbison**

## Introduction

Providing professional development to community health professionals is an important strategy of the Cancer Council. It serves two purposes: to increase the capacity of communities to influence behavioural determinants of cancer for both prevention and early detection, and to encourage an evidence-based approach to delivering a public health program.

Since the early 1990s, Quit and SunSmart have separately provided seminars to deliver campaign and program information to health professionals. In 1998, Quit and SunSmart decided to form a partnership, and were joined by PapScreen Victoria, to deliver a free information update and skills development workshop for community health professionals. The workshop is called the Seminar Series and is provided in each health region.

The Seminar Series was developed to provide updated campaign information, access to Cancer Council staff and an opportunity for networking and skills development. Each seminar has had a different theme for skills development: in October 1998 the theme was 'making the most of your health promotion activity' and in August 1999 the theme was 'working with groups and presentation skills'.

The seminars are usually held in approximately 10 regional locations and four metropolitan locations. In 1999, the seminar series was held twice and attracted about 100 people each time. In previous years, when the Seminar Series has been held only once during the year, there have been approximately 200 participants.

The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of attendance at the most recent seminar on participants' knowledge and workplace skills. In particular, the study sought to investigate how much they integrated what they learned at the seminars into their everyday work. Participants and their managers were asked about new knowledge and skills gained, networking opportunities and updating existing skills.

## Method

### Design

A follow-up study conducted three months after the August 1999 Seminar Series was designed to evaluate the impact of the series. This was done by asking both participants and their managers about the seminar. Participants were asked if they could give examples of what they gained from the seminar and how they have used what they learned. They were prompted to comment on three particular areas: networking opportunities, new skills and strategies, and updating existing skills. They were also asked to give their opinion on whether or not they had gained particular knowledge and skills. Managers were asked questions about their perceptions of what the participant had learned at the seminar and how they had used what they learned in their work.

## Subjects

In December 1999, data was collected by telephone interview from seminar participants and their managers. Of the 95 people who participated in the August 1999 seminar, 72 completed the telephone survey. This represents a 76% response rate. Of the 23 participants who didn't complete the follow-up survey, 15 were unable to be contacted, five were on leave, two were on student placement and one no longer worked at the same workplace.

Of the 72 participants contacted, 61 said that we could contact their manager. The reasons given for not agreeing to their manager being contacted were: participant is the manager (4), changed job (2), manager on leave (1), manager won't know about seminar (1) and other (2). Twenty-two of the managers completed the telephone survey. This indicates a 36% response rate. The reasons for managers not completing the survey were: unable to contact them (17), manager for multiple participants (7), holiday, sick, new manager (5), also attended the seminar (2) and no reason given (8).

## Procedures

Three days before telephone interviews were conducted, participants were sent a letter to inform them about the evaluation. A 5–10 minute interview was conducted with participants and they were asked to nominate their manager who, with permission, was also contacted by telephone.

## Results

### Participant Interviews

The Seminar Series was new to most participants: 58% of participants had attended only the most recent seminar, 24% had attended two and 18% had attended three or more Cancer Council seminars in the last three years. Most of the participants were nurses (56%). Health promotion officers also constituted a large group (21%). The remaining participants were community workers (13%), environmental health officers (3%), health planning officers (3%) and other (5%).

To provide a context for responses to the survey, participants were asked about the amount of time they spent on different health issues in their job. As Table 8.1 indicates, the participants reported spending a similar amount of time on skin cancer prevention and smoking and less time on cervical screening.

**Table 8.1 Percentage of time spent on various health areas relevant to the seminar (n=71)**

Health area relevant to the seminar	None of the time	Less than 10% of time	10% or more of the time
Skin cancer prevention	21%	38%	42%
Smoking	21%	47%	32%
Cervical screening	45%	25%	30%

A significant amount of time was also dedicated to the areas of health promotion (14% of responses), cardiovascular disease (12%), sexual and reproductive health (8%), child and maternal health (7%), diabetes (6%) and asthma (5%).

Participants were asked about networking opportunities gained from the seminar. As Table 8.2 indicates, the main networking area gained was with other health professionals. Networking with people from the Cancer Council was also frequently mentioned.

**Table 8.2 Networking opportunities (n=39)**

Opportunity	Percentage of responses
Other health professionals	49%
People from the Cancer Council	19%
Contacts for resources	11%
Other agencies	6%
Consolidating contacts	4%
Liaison for community projects	4%
Contacts with Quit	2%
Peer support	2%
Getting ideas from other programs	2%

Explanations of how participants have used networking opportunities in their work were given by 25 respondents. The most frequently given responses were: referrals (22%), education campaigns (15%), support for projects (11%) and contacts for ideas and resources (11%).

Presentation skills was the most often reported area in which new skills and strategies were gained. When asked what new skills were gained from the seminar, most responses related to presentations skills (49%) and group work skills (37%) (Table 8.3).

**Table 8.3 New skills and strategies (n=29)**

Skills and strategies	Percentage of responses
Presentation	49%
Games and interactive learning	17%
Using icebreakers	15%
Knowing your audience	5%
Running groups	5%
Cancer Council strategies	2%
How to help adults quit	2%
Building displays	2%
Marketing and promoting ideas	2%

Twenty-six respondents commented on how they have used the skills they learned. The most frequently mentioned use of skills was to improve presentations and group work (64%). Particular mention was made of having more confidence in presenting, using icebreakers, running groups on sexual health, using client participation in groups and using more simple language in presentations for ethnic groups.

Only 13 respondents provided comment on what existing skills were updated by attending the seminar. Presentation skills (47%) and fact sheets (33%) were most often mentioned (Table 8.4).

**Table 8.4 Updating existing skills (n=13)**

Existing skills	Percentage of responses
Presentation skills	47%
Fact sheets and statistics	33%
Audience participation	13%
Cervical screening	7%

The new and updated information that participants said they had gained reflects the content of the seminar (Table 8.5).

**Table 8.5 New and updated information (n=41)**

Information	Percentage of responses
Literature, resources and statistics – general	27%
Literature, resources and statistics – SunSmart	25%
Literature, resources and statistics – PapScreen	21%
Literature, resources and statistics – Quit	21%
Literature, resources and statistics – arthritis	6%

When asked how the new information they had learned was used, respondents most often reported providing information to clients and staff (23%) or including information in newsletters and fact sheets (10%). Eighteen per cent of responses indicated that information gained from the seminar had not been used yet and the remainder of the responses (49%) referred to specific projects.

Participants were asked for their opinion on specific outcomes of the seminar (Table 8.6). Each outcome was achieved for at least three-quarters of participants.

**Table 8.6 Participants' opinion on outcomes of the seminar (n=72)**

Outcome	Yes	No	Can't say
Increased your knowledge of how to access advice and resources from the Cancer Council	88%	10%	3%
Increased your knowledge of other workers in region	82%	14%	4%
Increased knowledge of cancer-related issues	81%	18%	1%
Improved your skills in delivering presentations, group work or setting up a data display	81%	15%	4%
Improved your skills to plan, implement and evaluate	76%	18%	6%
Increased your motivation in a particular area	75%	25%	–
Made you more confident about working with other health workers or groups	74%	25%	1%

Of the participants who said that the seminar did increase their motivation in a particular area, 25% nominated SunSmart, 17% nominated Quit and 10% nominated cervical screening as the area in which they were more motivated.

### Manager interviews

Of the 22 managers interviewed, 18 said that they had talked to the participant about the seminar. More than half (55%) were of the opinion that the seminar helped their staff become more confident in their skills. Many (41%) also said that their staff were more enthusiastic about their work as a result of attending the seminar (Table 8.7). A large proportion (41%) of managers thought that the seminar helped their staff to develop new community partnerships and networks, however, quite a few managers were unsure about this.

**Table 8.7 Managers' opinion on benefits of the seminar (n=22)**

Benefit	Yes	No	Don't know
More confidence in his/her skills	55%	36%	9%
More enthusiasm about his/her work	41%	50%	9%
Developed new community partnerships/networks	41%	36%	23%

The managers were asked their perceptions of new skills and knowledge gained by their staff as a result of attending the seminar. As Table 8.8 shows, the most frequently mentioned area was knowledge of cancer-related issues (26%), followed by presentation and group work skills (20%). Planning and evaluation skills and knowledge of how to access advice and resources from the Cancer Council were also frequently mentioned. Five managers did not answer this question.

**Table 8.8 Managers' opinion on new skills gained by participant (n=17)**

New skills	Percentage of responses
Knowledge of cancer-related issues	26%
Presentation and group work skills	20%
Planning and evaluation skills	15%
Knowledge on how to access advice and resources from the Cancer Council	15%
Knowledge of other workers in the region	9%
More motivated to work in the area	3%
More confidence in their job	3%
Up-to-date information	3%
Application for funding	3%
Not sure	3%

Managers were asked about the same seminar outcomes as the participants. The outcomes most frequently mentioned (95%) by managers were an increase in knowledge about advice and resources from the Cancer Council, an increase in knowledge of other workers in the region (75%) and cancer-related issues (75%) (Table 8.9). The managers' responses to other questions about outcomes were consistent with participants' responses except that a larger proportion of managers than participants were inclined to respond 'can't say'. Two managers did not answer this question.

**Table 8.9 Managers' opinion on outcomes of the seminar (n=20)**

Outcome	Yes	No	Can't say
Increased his/her knowledge of how to access advice and resources from the Cancer Council	95%	–	5%
Increased his/her knowledge of other workers in region	75%	10%	15%
Increased his/her knowledge of cancer related issues	75%	–	25%
Improved his/her skills in delivering presentations, group work or setting up a data display	65%	10%	25%
Improved his/her skills to plan, implement and evaluate	55%	25%	20%
Made him/her more confident about working with other health workers or groups	55%	40%	5%
Increased his/her motivation in a particular area	50%	35%	15%

Of the managers who said that the seminar increased motivation in a particular area for their staff member, 42% identified SunSmart as an area of increased motivation. Managers were asked if there are any barriers or difficulties which would prevent their staff from attending similar seminars in the future. Fifty-five per cent (n=12) said yes. Nine managers commented on the type of barriers, with cost of staff being away the most often mentioned barrier (67% of responses). Time constraints (22%) and organisational restructuring (11%) were other reasons mentioned.

## Discussion

The results of the three-month follow-up survey indicate that the Seminar Series was successful in achieving its objectives of providing updated campaign information, access to Cancer Council staff, and an opportunity for networking and skills development. Importantly, the study also showed that seminar participants integrated what they learned into their day-to-day work.

The Seminar Series gave participants an opportunity to network, particularly with other health professionals, and their new networking contacts were frequently used for referral and education campaigns. Managers also identified networking with Cancer Council staff and other workers in the region as an outcome for their staff who attended the seminar.

Improving existing or gaining new presentation and group work skills was frequently reported by participants and managers. This is consistent with the theme of the Seminar Series held in August 1999: 'working with groups and presentation skills'. The most common new skills mentioned by participants were presentation skills. Participants gave examples of their use of these skills, which included increased confidence in running groups and using client participation in groups. These new skills were also mentioned by managers.

Participants reported receiving new and updated information in all the areas covered by the seminar; this was used to provide information to clients and staff. Managers' perceptions were consistent with this and knowledge of cancer-related issues was the most frequently mentioned.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the value of the seminars to community service providers and the Cancer Council was confirmed. Participants and their managers reported the acquisition of skills, knowledge and networks. In addition, the information received was well integrated into their workplace and new skills were put into practice. It is recommended that the findings of this study be made known to managers of community organisations to encourage future participation in the Seminar Series.