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Program reducing alcohol harm in older Australians a finalist in national primary health awards

A team of health professionals, who developed Australia's first program to reduce alcohol-harm in older people, has been named a finalist in the 2013 HESTA Primary Health Care Awards.

The Older Wiser Lifestyles Team (OWL) — based at Peninsula Health in Melbourne's south — has been recognised as one of five finalists in the Team Excellence category, for developing a program to identify and engage older people who are at risk of experiencing alcohol-related harm.

The awards recognise the dedication and professionalism of those working in primary health care including physiotherapists, dentists, pharmacists, therapists, GPs, rehabilitation professionals, health educators and medical practice managers.

Head of OWL, Simon Ruth, said the team engaged with 200 older Australians, aged between 60 and 96 years, whose drinking placed them at risk of experiencing harm from alcohol.

"Three months after a brief intervention by the OWL team, individuals, on average, halved the amount of alcohol they had previously consumed," Mr Ruth said.

"Using international research, the OWL team developed an Alcohol Related Problems Survey which was placed in a range of health care settings, including many GP clinics.

"Each individual completing the survey received a report outlining potential risks and strategies to reduce them. A team member then followed up with a phone call, encouraging further engagement with the program."

Mr Ruth said up to 30 per cent of older Australians were at risk of experiencing health problems related to alcohol.

"The risks for older people are different to those of young drinkers. Older people are more likely to be taking multiple medications, have other health issues, be socially isolated and experience change in physiology — all of which affect the way alcohol is metabolised," Mr Ruth said.

"We want to raise awareness of the risks associated with alcohol use by older people, and work with them to reduce their alcohol consumption and related illnesses."

Mr Ruth and the other finalists will be flown to Melbourne for an awards dinner on 6 June 2013, when the winners will be revealed.

A \$30,000 prize pool will be shared among the winners, courtesy of long-term HESTA awards sponsor, ME Bank. The Team Excellence Award winner will receive a \$10,000 development grant to put towards the implementation of their program or initiative. The Young Leader and Individual Distinction Award winners will each receive a \$5,000 ME Bank *EveryDay* Transaction Account and a \$5,000 education grant.

HESTA is the leading super fund for health and community services, with more than 750,000 members and \$22 billion in assets. More people in health and community services choose HESTA for their super.

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