

5 June

## Acting out for youth mental health

An innovative, interactive youth mental health conference will be held in the McKinnon Building at the University of Wollongong on 7-8 June.

Supported by the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute, Healthy Minds Theatre will explore mental health topics through a theatre piece entitled *Understanding Depression: Fill in the Blank*, written and directed by the cofounder of Sydney's Milk Create Theatre Company, Matt Stewart, in collaboration with Mind Blank, a not-for-profit organisation that generates awareness of mental health through theatre and whose president, Ally Kelly, is a former UOW Creative Arts and Psychology graduate.

Based on the true story of Dan, a young person who suffered clinical depression, actors will tell Dan's life story on stage with the audience invited to suggest ways for him to overcome difficulties.

Targeting senior students, carers, school teachers, other community service providers and the general public, the format aims to increase young people's understanding of mental illness, improve their ability to identify risk factors and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health problems.

Organised by the Wollongong Suicide Prevention Network in partnership with the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District (including the Youth Mental Health Service), the conference also aims to boost the number of individuals seeking help regarding their emotional and social wellbeing and increase the identification, referral and treatment of at risk individuals by service systems and professionals.

A total of five theatre forums will be conducted, with a psychologist from Youth Mental Health available to assist young people and carers with their clinical enquiries. Local agencies have also been invited to showcase their services in information stalls outside the venue to further reduce the institutionalised perception of mental health services.

The conference is funded by the Department of Health and Ageing (Mental Health Conference Funding Program). It is expected that around 1,000 people will attend the conference over the two days, making it the largest conference of its type ever in the Illawarra. The organisers hope that the blueprint can be shared with other regional, rural and remote areas via the Wollongong and Shoalhaven Suicide Prevention and Awareness Networks.

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