

ARTS



PARTNERSHIP PRESENTATION

PQSA

What you didn't know

PQSA chief Peter Stewart reveals the inner workings of this growing service provider

What is PQSA's primary role?

We are the peak spinal cord injury community body in South Australia and have been since 1963. Our focus is predominantly on improving the lives of people when they've sustained a spinal cord injury. They might have significant limb dysfunction or be someone who needs a ventilator to breathe for them and can't move and requires 24/7 support, or even someone who walks well but has bowel and bladder issues as a result of their injury, which is often the case with spinal nerve damage.

Who are the people you serve?

People have this assumption that someone with a spinal cord injury is a risk-taking 20-year-old male. In actual fact, spinal cord injury can and does happen to anyone, and falls among the elderly are becoming the most prevalent cause of spinal injury. Gone are the days when PQSA was around providing services to young males. We've now got males and females across the age spectrum, from the age of 12 to 95. People come to us during the worst episodes of their lives. We are here to support them in their transition to a new life and throughout their life journey.

Do you only offer help to people with spinal cord injuries?

No. HomeCare+, our broader disability services commercial arm, is 30 years old this year. We provide in-home and accommodation-based supports for people from all spectrums of disability, intellectual and physical. Our training model is unique – in-house training complemented by an extensive e-learning system. We employ registered nurses for the health planning in particular and for people with complex needs.

Do you support people across the whole of South Australia?

We are represented around the state with six offices in total. There's one in the city and in Berri, Mount Gambier, Port Lincoln, Port Pirie and Kadina. These offices are key to our services and being able to offer them to people, face-to-face, wherever they are.

How big is your operation and how many people do you help?

PQSA and HomeCare+ provide 600,000 hours of support to our clients every year. We have 620 staff working full-time and part-time, serving about 650 HomeCare+ clients and 450 active PQSA clients. Since the NDIS rollout began in 2014, we've grown about 45 per cent. That's new people coming into our service.

Your group is a registered National Disability Insurance Scheme provider?

Yes, we have great expertise when it comes to the NDIS. We've employed people to just focus on information

sharing and making sure our staff and our clients have up-to-date information about the NDIS. We are able to share that information through the regional offices and we deliver NDIS information sessions in those regional offices. We've been involved in the rollout of the NDIS from the start of the pilot sites, providing services to children in the early days.

What are the unique services you provide?

Our **Community Lifestyle Advisers** is one of our flagship services. They are spinal cord injury nurses but they provide support and advice across a range of areas, from skin problems, bowel and bladder issues, moving in and out of hospital and who to go to for advice. If people are having problems getting into outpatients at a hospital, our advisers are a great conduit to the health system. They can also provide practical advice on where to seek equipment, how to access Centrelink. It's about improved lifestyle, improved wellbeing.

Our **Peer Support Program** was the first community-based program of its kind in Australia. We know that peer support – people with lived experience of spinal cord injury – is vital. Our peer support advocates work at Hampstead Rehabilitation Centre, doing one-on-one work with people who are newly injured and are coming to terms with living with spinal cord injury. It's important work because the advocates can tell them, 'It's not the end of life, this is what you can achieve, this is what you can do'. It's a human conversation about practical advice. We've now extended that service to the regions and we are reaching out to rural and remote areas face-to-face and through teleconferencing.

We have four **Occupational Therapists** who are all experts in spinal cord injury and physical disability. They can provide the specialist support around equipment, assistive technology and home modifications. One of the key things is helping people get back to driving their car, which is crucial for independence, returning to work and their lifestyle.

What sort of assistive technology is available to your clients?

We have the QWERTY Technology Hub that we fund and run and it will be part of the revamped Repat rehabilitation unit. We have hardware and software that people with any level of spinal injury or brain injury can access to allow them to get on the internet and learn how to use computers again. People use the hub to do online banking, they run small businesses out of there, whatever they need, because we've got the software they can access if they haven't got the hand function, for instance, to use computers. That's run by paid staff and volunteers with spinal injuries.

How to get to do re mi

People of all abilities are coming together to sing as one in an inclusive choir for people who want their voice heard beyond the walls of their shower cubicle



(From left) With One Voice choir member Karen Zaskolny; choir co-ordinator David Kelly; and choir members sing up a storm during their regular weekly practise at their Kingston Park base. Pictures: Mike Burton

WORDS / JENNIFER HULLICK

The noise coming from Kingston House on this summer evening is joyful and melodious, so much so that people passing through the surrounding parklands stop to listen and applaud.

What is not evident is that the With One Voice Kingston Park choir began singing together just nine months ago. Most of their members had never before sung in public – and many thought they never would.

This is an inclusive choir made up of local residents of all ages and abilities – a group to which allcomers have access and where everybody gets a voice.

The brainchild of Creativity Australia, the With One Voice choir concept is in its 10th year, with 22 inclusive choirs dotted around the country.

Creativity Australia program co-ordinator Lydia Griffiths says the vision was to provide the impetus and seed funding to set up choirs that were accessible to everyone to come together and bond around music and singing.

To date, choirs nationally have welcomed people from all faiths, cultures, ages, abilities, backgrounds and socio-economic situations, including those with disabilities, such as autism, visual impairment and cerebral palsy. Griffiths says about 25 per cent of people in the choirs identify as having a disability.

At Kingston Park, the sole With One Voice choir in South Australia to date, co-ordinator David Kelly says access to the group is facilitated in different ways.

"We had our first rehearsal in May 2018," he says, "This is a choir where there are no auditions – everybody is welcome and, if you can't afford the membership fees, it doesn't matter; we'll make it work. We advertised through the local community, through the residents'

association, local councils and word of mouth. We had about 35 people to our first session. That was a great success and we've continued since that time."

Creativity Australia is also an approved NDIS provider, which means people living with a disability can claim NDIS funding to cover their choir membership contribution.

What the group has in common, regardless of background, is they are locals who enjoy singing and are happy to work together so everyone can find their voice and form new social connections. "We have a shared meal together with the choir," Kelly says.

"It's a very social event. We want to build connections in our local community and food is a really traditional way of getting people together."

Co-conductors Michelle Byrne and Heather Frahn have worked on musical projects for years and were more than happy to back the choir when first Frahn and then Byrne were recruited.

"Here we don't use any sheet music so for starters there's nothing to intimidate people," Byrne says. "We teach a lot by call and response, so I will sing the parts and people will sing it back to us."

Frahn says song choice is important: "Our songs have a meaning to them that is positive and uplifting."

"It's getting people singing, clapping, stamping their feet, having a laugh and connecting through music."

For those who feel they cannot sing, for whatever reason, the choir gives them the opportunity to test their talents in a safe place. "We set an intention with ourselves and everyone here, which is we believe everyone can sing and believe everyone has a voice and this is a space where everyone can express their voice," Byrne says.

"We've found that people come along and say, 'I can't sing' but, after the first session, you see them joining in, their faces are lit up and, after a few weeks,



they've gained confidence and they realise they actually can sing."

Singing in a choir has the potential not only to bring people together but also give them better health outcomes.

"I've been involved in singing and choirs since I was a kid," Kelly says. "I've spent four years working at the SA Health and Medical Research Institute at the Wellbeing and Resilience Centre.

"We have done some research into singing and there's no doubt that the science of neuroplasticity – the capacity of our brain to create new neural pathways – is enhanced by creative activities like singing.

"And we know that hormones, like endorphins, are released when we sing collectively in a group and these just make us feel good. It's not just the social part of

it that makes us feel good, it's also a chemical process in our brain."

Choir member Karen Zaskolny says the With One Voice experience has been a revelation after she learned about it from a flyer in her letterbox.

"I have previously joined two choirs but they didn't suit me," she says. "One was too casual and people didn't respect the process. The other one was extremely formal and they sang really old World War II songs – Vera Lynn."

Fortunately, Zaskolny's desire to sing overcame any reservations she had and she plucked up the courage to call. "I'm one of the people who rang up Dave and said, 'I can't sing, is it still OK to join?'," says the freelance copywriter who works from home.

"I just loved it from the moment I came

here. The singing was a big deal but I was actually looking for community. In May last year, I had no regular work at all. There's an old saying – a happy life needs three things: someone to love, something to do and something to look forward to.

"I had none of those things in my life at the time, so I'd very much isolated myself. So this choir was my something to look forward to and gives me some structure. I love the community supper afterwards: you chat with people and I meet new people every time and catch up with people for coffee.

"A lot of people are local so you see them on the street and say 'hi'."

Considering starting your own choir? Contact Creativity Australia at creativity-australia.org.au/

ROYAL COMMISSION CLOSER

A royal commission into the mistreatment of disabled Australians is starting to take shape, with the Morrison government releasing draft terms of reference and agreeing to fully fund it.

The federal government is proposing to investigate the violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of Australians with disabilities. Disability advocates are pushing for the royal commission to be called before the Morrison government calls an election and enters caretaker mode, when such an inquiry can no longer be established. "We are very alive to the timing constraints here," Social Services Minister Paul Fletcher said at the time of the announcement. – AAP