

GP LINK Lunches | Amy Prince SWSPHN

Dr Kenneth McCroary (pictured), Chair of Sydney South West GP Link, hosts a series of meetings with clinical/political/regional individuals or organisations to discuss issues and solutions for GPs working in South Western Sydney.



Ken McCroary – Welcome to the latest instalment of GP Link Lunches.

As members of Sydney South West GP Link and those who have visited our website at www.sswgp.link would be aware, one of the main focuses of our organisation is to advocate and provide support for general practitioners and general practices in South Western Sydney including the wellbeing of GPs and their practice staff.

Benestar

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I was therefore very interested recently when contacted by Amy Prince, the Director of Planning and Performance at South Western Sydney Primary Health Network to discuss a program she was developing within the PHN in collaboration with Benestar to provide support for GPs and their practice staff.

Benestar is essentially a wellbeing organisation with a 30-year history of working with businesses to improve health and wellbeing. They provide a coach-type service, assisting with issues including life, body, money, relationships, work, family and mind.

Amy has 12 years experience in healthcare management at various levels from frontline to executive roles and has been employed as South Western Sydney PHN Director of Planning and Performance since 2017. She holds a Masters of Public Health and a Masters of Management and has a passion for serving the communities of South Western Sydney.

Ken McCroary - It is an incredibly ambitious project, Amy, to attempt to provide the health and wellbeing support offered by Benestar to all of the general practitioners and their staff within the Southwest Sydney region. I am very interested to hear more about this development and welcome you today to GP Link Lunches. Can you just give us some background initially about the organisation you're representing today – South Western Sydney PHN?

Amy Prince - South Western Sydney PHN covers the region from Bankstown down to Bowral, the population is edging out to 1 million now, and we have three key strategic focus areas. The first is integration of the healthcare system, so we do a lot of work around trying to connect GPs with the hospital system and the broader local health district services. We also do commissioning of health services which is about contracting services based on the needs of the population, so that's a shift away from just buying services that exist – instead we're asking services to change to meet the needs of our local community. And capacity building is our third strategic pillar and that's the support we offer to GPs, so we have a fairly sensitive practice support team, we do lots of comms and updates out to the GPs, we do CPD activities and we have quality improvement initiatives like our QRPC program.

Ken McCroary – So we are, as you know, a local organisation and I'm just wondering if you're aware of any particular issues or challenges facing GPs in South Western Sydney at the moment?

Amy Prince - It's a really critical question at the moment isn't it? We recognise the immense pressure and stress that has been put on primary care in our region over the past 18 months, but the past 3-4 weeks in particular has held quite an immense challenge for primary care. The shifting sands in terms of how patients with COVID are managed: how do you manage COVID patients who have low health literacy and come from low SES backgrounds, and people from a non-English speaking background? How does that information get communicated in a way they can understand? There are some major challenges in the primary care sector this month in particular.

Ken McCroary - I'm going to talk a bit about Benestar in a minute, but just before I do, what are some of the support practices you guys have to help GPs in our area on a broader scale in terms of COVID?

Amy Prince - We are really pushing out as many comms as we have at our fingertips – so any information we get from the department we share as quickly as we can. We've done quite a lot of distribution of PPE for GPs and aged care facilities and we do regular updates of the HealthPathways - providing support to GPs to understand how to manage patients that present to them, escalation points where they are available and access to other services, like psychosocial support for people with COVID, are a few of the examples I can think of.

Ken McCroary - With this escalation of COVID in terms of cases and complications and the burden shifting from local hospital community services to general practices in caring for the acute and long-COVID diseases as well, I see you've started the program with Benestar. It sounds very interesting and very promising, can you explain in a bit more detail what that's about please?

Amy Prince - We recently funded Benestar for 12 months to extend our organisation's employee assistance program to GPs, nurses and practice staff who work in South Western Sydney, and their families, which is a large number of people, so this is recognising that the pandemic has had an impact on primary care staff both in terms of their mental health and their physical health. Primary care aside, we know that 50% of the population will experience mental ill-health at some point in their lifetime and we know that GPs aren't immune to that. The program we have funded is an employee assistance program that will provide individual coaching with qualified clinicians like psychologists, dieticians, social workers and others, depending on your specific needs for your physical and mental health. They can help with a wide range of issues, covering the workplace, family and relationship, grief, improving exercise and nutrition and lots of other things in between. If you're a practice manager, reception staff, a nurse or GP working in South Western Sydney you can call the service and get support from a qualified clinician, it is free of charge and confidential. You might only speak to them once or you might take advantage of the full 6 sessions you would have access to per presenting issue.

Ken McCroary - That sounds very helpful – just thinking about the practices and the GPs in the region, and their staff and their families, have you got any idea how many people that actual entails? have access to per presenting issue.

Amy Prince - We know that we have over 1000 GPs, 700-800 practice staff, so its probably edging out to around 5000 if you include families as well.

Ken McCroary - That's a big commitment and obviously a fair bit of funding on your behalf so we thank you a lot for that endeavour. How are we going to get people to know about this? How are we going to get people comfortable to participate going forward?

Amy Prince - We are doing some promotional activities within our network but we appreciate that GP Link will also help in doing some promotional work. We really want to make this successful, as you said it's quite a substantial funding commitment, but it's just a small gesture from us to support our primary care workforce. In terms of making people feel comfortable, I want to reiterate that the service is totally confidential, so the only information the PHN will get access to, is really high-level data about the number of people who have accessed the service and the number of sessions they have had. No information will be shared about who has accessed the service, or the locations they have accessed the service from, and it's not linked to Medicare in any way so the information about an individual GP who has used the service doesn't go anywhere outside Benestar, which I think is important for a health care professional to know.

Ken McCroary - That's correct, but then we should also be reassuring our colleagues too that if they do have any issues with mental health, even with Medicare assistance, routine psychology and psychiatric care has a fair bit of confidentiality around it and there should be no reason to feel like they can't go ahead with that treatment particularly now with pressures and stress both at work and throughout the community.

Amy Prince - That's absolutely right, but we do hear of cases with people feeling uncomfortable accessing those services through Medicare and I guess this is another option if people do have those concerns. I think one of the other benefits with this system is that often the clinician that you're talking to works interstate so you're not being treated by someone locally who is part of your referral network.

Ken McCroary - Excellent – you're not going to run into them with a mask on down at the local shops are we? You at South Western Sydney Primary Health Network have actually had some experience with Benestar for the last year or so, is that what I understand?

Amy Prince - We have actually used this service for seven years, it's a long-standing relationship. It's been really well-received by our staff and their families. I have personally used the service and have found it to be extremely helpful.

Ken McCroary - That's what I was going to touch on, what sort of feedback has the wider organisation had from the program and have you noticed any changes in staff in terms of morale or health changes?

Amy Prince - We have a fairly high commitment to mental health and wellbeing within our organisation. It is openly talked about and lots of people have said they have accessed the service. It's helpful if we're trying to support an employee who is struggling with mental health, if we can say 'call this number, they'll be able to help you out' and I guess that's how we would hope general practices might use the service as well, to be able to refer their staff for confidential support.

Ken McCroary - I think it's a great idea. Your comment earlier about it being a small part of assistance, I actually think it's a big part, so we really appreciate it thank you. I think we'll try and get access to some flyers to put up on our website, to try and encourage use of this assistance program because I really feel that we should be supporting it and looking out for each other, our colleagues, staff and family members and feeling confident that the program is going to be helpful.

Thanks Amy, and thanks again for your time today. So to our Sydney Southwest GP Link members and our other GP colleagues throughout South Western Sydney who have not yet joined the organisation, please feel free to log onto the website at sswgp.link where I will endeavour to have some further information and contact details allowing you, your staff and your family to access this timely, and I think very important, initiative.

Clinicians - Depending on the support you need there are psychologists, social workers, psychotherapist, financial counsellors or dieticians available (they use the term coach, but they are allied health professionals)

How to access Benestar - Phone **1300 360 364** and let them know you are a GP/nurse/practice staff practising in South Western Sydney (or a family member). They will then make an appointment for you to speak with someone.

Or

Login via the Benehub: <https://www.benestar.com/user/login>

ID: SWSGP

Token: SWSGP01

The webportal is also full of resources to improve your physical and wellbeing. Attached are a couple flyers, including a COVID self-care check-in.

If you're not a member of GP Link already or you would like to learn more, visit GP Link's website [here](#).