

# The best fun ... with half your clothes on: belly dancing – a fun and inclusive activity for every woman

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim:** The aim of the tour was to provide a safe, inspirational environment to promote belly dance as a physical activity, to enhance self-esteem and to form social networks among women living in rural and remote areas of Western Australia.

**Design:** Most towns hosted a belly dancing performance, children's classes, a women's workshop, and a hafla (Middle Eastern dance party). At every event the Healthway message 'Enjoy Healthy Eating', was promoted, and leaflets about women's cancers and incontinence were available.

**Setting:** Five belly dancers travelled 6000 kilometres to fifteen rural towns over five and half weeks.

**Intervention:** Nearly 700 women and children attended belly dance classes, with a further 179 hafla participants, and 960 people attending the performances. Evaluations were conducted at all adult workshops, except in Wiluna.

**Results:** One hundred and sixty-two people completed our workshop questionnaires. Thirteen per cent of respondents said they didn't normally do any exercise. The majority of women were aged between 18 to 34 years (38%) or 35 to 54 years (40%). For 130 (80%) participants it was their first belly dance class. Feedback was very positive with 81% rating their enjoyment of the class as excellent. The vast majority (93%) of women wanted to do more belly dance classes and 81% wanted to be kept informed about future belly dance opportunities.

**Conclusion:** The tour, delivered by five enthusiastic amateur belly dancers, exceeded expectations in the response received from the women and children in each community. Since the tour, women in at least two of the towns continue to get together to belly dance, and in the three towns which had existing classes, women have continued to use the dances taught on the tour. Contact has been maintained with local co-ordinators in most towns regarding future belly dance events. The tour has demonstrated that belly dancing can encourage women who would not normally exercise to engage in physical activity, and so provides an inclusive solution to the rising levels of inactivity and obesity. It also creates social networks to support and sustain the behaviour change, and these can potentially provide social and health benefits.

## INTRODUCTION

Physical inactivity, in terms of its contribution to the overall burden of disease, is the most important area for risk reduction among Australian women.<sup>1</sup> Participation in regular physical activity has important health and social benefits, and can impact on five national health

priority areas: cardiovascular disease, cancer, mental health, diabetes mellitus, and arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions.<sup>2,3</sup>

Depression is the most common primary care psychiatric diagnosis - the lifetime prevalence of major depression is 5% for men and 10% for women. Recent evidence has shown that exercise is as effective as psychotherapy and anti-depressant drug therapy in treating mild to moderate depression.<sup>4,5</sup>

A review of physical activity in Western Australia in 2002 found that 55% of Western Australians reported participating in sufficient exercise, ie 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on five or more days per week. This was a drop of three per cent since 1999.<sup>6,7</sup> Males were more likely to be sufficiently active (57%) compared to females (53%), and 13% of Western Australians did not participate in any physical activity.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most obvious consequences of this decrease in physical activity has been an increase in obese and overweight individuals. The 2002 report found that overall 35% of Western Australians were overweight and 13% were obese, and these figures were higher in rural areas (12% of metropolitan residents were obese compared to 15-16% of rural residents).<sup>7</sup> It has been predicted that if current trends continue, 65% of adult Australians will be overweight or obese by 2020.<sup>8</sup>

Belly dancing has enormous benefits for women - besides improving fitness, posture, co-ordination and flexibility, it also increases self-esteem and confidence.<sup>9</sup>

There is a huge interest in belly dancing in Australia. For example, a search for 'belly dancing Western Australia' on Google brought up 12 400 web pages.<sup>10</sup> One of the authors (MG) has run belly dancing classes in two rural towns and has experienced first hand the passion and enthusiasm of her students. The belly-dancing craze is not confined to dancers - in both towns the belly dance network includes a sub-group of women who do not dance but have set up a sewing group to make costumes for those that do.

There are also potential social, economic and environmental benefits for the community from participation in the arts.<sup>11,12</sup> An involvement in making music or singing has been recognised as a determinant of survival.<sup>13</sup> Links between the arts, mental health and well-being, and the role of dance and music in raising immunity and the improving the management of chronic pain and cancer have also been documented.<sup>14,15</sup>

Aware of these issues, the inspiration for taking belly dancing to the bush came to one of the authors (EU) after seeing the film 'Priscilla Queen of the Desert' many years ago.

## METHODS

Both authors successfully applied for Healthway sponsorship and also secured funding from Country Arts, the Gascoyne Development Commission, the Gascoyne and Midwest Population Health Units, the Shires of Mt Magnet, Meekatharra and Mullewa, Wiluna Aboriginal Medical Service and Shark Bay Arts Council. Altogether, the budget was just over \$20 000, with in kind support from the Cancer Council of Western Australia, the Combined Universities of Rural Health and the Arts and Cultural Development Council in Geraldton.

Five women, an epidemiologist, a doctor, an arts teacher, a physical activity trainer, and a community arts officer, who were all experienced belly dancers, hired a campervan and took time off from their routine work to undertake the tour. The Libbyah Queen of the Desert Belly Dancing Tour visited fifteen rural and remote communities in the Gascoyne, Midwest and

Pilbara regions over five and a half weeks in June/July 2004. The towns visited were Dongara, Kalbarri, Northampton, Denham, Carnarvon, Burringurrah, Exmouth, Tom Price, Newman, Meekatharra, Wiluna, Cue, Mt Magnet, Mullewa and Geraldton.

In most towns there was a belly dancing performance, children's classes, a women's workshop, and a hafla (Middle Eastern dance party). The events were promoted and facilitated by local co-ordinators who had offered their support for the tour. This guaranteed a certain level of advertising by word of mouth and helped to ensure they were held at times and staged in venues that were acceptable to local people. Media releases through radio, and local papers were also used to promote the events.

We provided hip and head scarves at the children's classes and scarves and dress up clothes at the women's workshops and haflas. These broke the ice as people selected which clothes they wanted to wear and ensured a fun start to the events (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Getting dressed for the part



At all the children's classes and women's workshops we taught the participants a simple dance to music called 'Move It!' The music and dance instructions were left with the local co-ordinators in most towns to enable participants to continue to practice the dance.

At every event the Healthway message 'Enjoy Healthy Eating' was promoted, and at the women's workshops and haflas information leaflets about breast cancer, cervical cancer and incontinence were available. These topics were chosen as they are among the most important health issues facing women today.<sup>1</sup> Evaluation sheets were distributed to participants at the end of every women's workshop, except in Wiluna.

## RESULTS

In total, there were 20 children's classes, 17 performances, 14 women's workshops and ten haflas on the Libbyah Queen of the Desert Belly Dancing Tour, and around 1830 people experienced belly dancing at these events (Table 1).

**Table 1 Attendance at events on the Libbyah Queen of the Desert Belly Dancing Tour, sponsored by Enjoy Healthy Eating**

	Midwest	Gascoyne	Pilbara	Whole tour
No of towns	9	4	2	15
No of children's classes	7	11	2	20
Total no participants	151	217	46	414
No of children (<=12)	44	192	0	236
No of youth (aged 13-17)	107 (20 Aborig)	25 (20 Aborig)	46 (4 Aborig)	178 (44 Aborig)
No of performances	12	3	2	17
No attended performances	455	215	290	960
No of workshops	8	3	3	14
Total no of workshop participants	146 (incl. 24 children)	72 (incl. 26 children)	59 (incl. 6 children)	277 (incl. 56 children)
No of adults	64	37	38	139
No of seniors	6	4	2	12
No of children	24	26	6	56
No of youth	15 (13 Aborig)	2	6	23 (13 Aborig)
Age unknown	37	3	7	47
No of haflas	5	3	2	10
Total no of hafla participants	95	56	28	179
Total	847	560	423	1 830

The tour exceeded our target numbers in every age group except the elderly (Table 2), although 47 people did not record their age.

**Table 2 Achievement of targets on the Libbyah Queen of the Desert Belly Dancing Tour, sponsored by Enjoy Healthy Eating**

Target group	Target number <sup>1</sup>	Actual number
Children (aged <=12 years)	240	292
Youth (aged 13 to 17 years)	36	144 <sup>2</sup>
Adults (aged 18 to 55 years)	120	139
Seniors (aged 55+ years)	36	12
Aboriginal youth	45	57
Age unknown	N/A	47
Total	477	691 <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This was arbitrarily estimated by one of the authors (MG) who had been giving classes in rural towns over the preceding four years, e.g. Children (under 12) 240 (20 in each school class in 12 towns, M:F ratio 1), Youth (13-18) 36 (3 in each town, all females) etc.

<sup>2</sup> This figure excludes Aboriginal youth, who are shown separately.

<sup>3</sup> This total only includes participants in children's classes and adult workshops. There were a further 179 hafla participants, and 960 people who attended our performances.

A total of 277 people attended the belly dancing workshops. Although the workshops were aimed at women, 56 (20%) of the workshop participants were children (Table 3).

One hundred and sixty-two people completed our workshop questionnaires. The age range of participants (who gave their age) was from 4 to 70 years, but the majority of women were aged between 18 to 34 years (38%) or 35 to 54 years (40%).

For 130 (80%) participants it was their first belly dance class. The proportion was highest in the Midwest (88%) and lowest in the Gascoyne (64%), due to regular belly dance classes in Carnarvon. The vast majority (93%) of women wanted to do more belly dancing classes and

131 (81%) wanted to be kept informed about future belly dance opportunities. Eighty-one per cent of participants rated their enjoyment of the class as excellent.

**Table 3 Analysis of workshop questionnaires from the Libbyah Queen of the Desert Belly Dancing Tour, sponsored by Enjoy Healthy Eating**

	Midwest	Gascoyne	Pilbara	Whole tour
No. of participants	146	72	59	277
No. of completed questionnaires	75	44	43	162
Age				
Not stated	7(9%)	2 (4%)	1 (2%)	10 (6%)
<13	7 (9%)	1 (2%)	2 (5%)	10 (6%)
13-17	4 (5%)	0	0	4 (3%)
18-34	21 (28%)	17 (39%)	23 (53%)	61 (38%)
35-54	30 (40%)	20 (45%)	15 (35%)	65 (40%)
55+	6 (8%)	4 (9%)	2 (5%)	12 (7%)
Enjoyment				
Excellent	57 (76%)	37 (84%)	38 (88%)	132 (81%)
Good	18 (24%)	7 (16%)	5 (12%)	30 (19%)
Average	0	0	0	0
Needs more work	0	0	0	0
First BD class?				
Yes	66 (88%)	28 (64%)	36 (84%)	130 (80%)
No	9 (12%)	16 (36%)	7 (16%)	32 (20%)
Do other exercise?				
Yes	62 (83%)	39 (89%)	40 (93%)	141 (87%)
No	13 (17%)	5 (11%)	3 (7%)	21 (13%)
Want more BD classes?				
Yes	68 (91%)	43 (98%)	40 (93%)	151 (93%)
No	7 (9%)	1 (2%)	3 (7%)	11 (7%)
Keep informed?				
Yes	59 (79%)	41 (93%)	32 (74%)	132 (81%)
No	16 (21%)	3 (7%)	11 (26%)	30 (19%)

Thirteen per cent of respondents said they didn't normally do any exercise, the same as the State average. The percentage of non-exercisers was highest in the Midwest (17%) and lowest in the Pilbara (7%). This could be because of the younger age profile of women in the Pilbara, where 60% of women at the workshops were aged 34 years or younger.

## What they liked most

In the comments on what the women liked most about the workshop the following were mentioned:

- having fun - 44 times
- learning belly dancing - 38 times
- dressing up - 28 times
- instructors - 27 times
- friendly/relaxed atmosphere - 25 times
- health/exercise - 16 times

- getting together/joining in - 11 times
- new/different experience - 10 times
- 'everything' – 9 times
- music - 9 times
- felt comfortable – 9 times
- expression of femininity - 6 times
- energetic/uplifting – 6 times.

We also asked the women at the workshops and haflas to sign our pap smear flag for the Cancer Council. The quotes from the flag (shown below) illustrate how belly dancing is seen as fun not sport:

The best fun ... with half your clothes on. Please come back.

Great work out, girls. Thank you, I had fun!!

A chance to dance like no other. So wonderful. Thanks for coming.

... they demonstrate the inclusiveness of belly dance (Figure 2):

**Figure 2 Having fun in Dongara**



See – you are never too old.

Love the moves, makes the body feel great. Thank you for the experience.

Fantastic, the bigger the belly the better.

... and also acknowledge the importance of the female connection that occurs through belly dance (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Workshop participants Shark Bay



Wow, a truly Pilbara Goddess moment. Thank you so much for sharing your passion and energy.

Outstanding celebration of womanhood - should be more 'secret women's business'.

A beautifully warm, loving experience out here in the desert. We are all gorgeous women.

The tour generated both local and regional media interest and was featured in 17 publications and on at least five radio programs. Television interest was also generated, but unfortunately not until after the tour had been concluded.

## DISCUSSION

In 2000, the Premier's Physical Activity Taskforce for Western Australia was established to develop a strategy to improve physical activity levels in the Western Australian community. The goal of the Taskforce was to increase the proportion of Western Australians who are sufficiently active, according to national recommendations, from 58% to 63% over ten years.<sup>16</sup>

However, traditional physical activities decreased between 1999 and 2002 and incidental activity also dropped. Thirteen per cent of Western Australians are physically inactive, and this figure is even higher in rural areas (15% in the Kimberley/ Pilbara and 18% in the Midwest and Goldfields).<sup>7</sup>

One of the factors cited as a barrier to physical activity, particularly for overweight and obese people, was confidence in their ability to be physically active.<sup>8</sup> Encouraging the sedentary to be active is a challenge as people who don't do habitual exercise often feel excluded from the 'sporting community.'<sup>16</sup> Also, for increased compliance and to maintain a change in behaviour individuals need social support and exercise programs must be fun, convenient and varied.<sup>16</sup>

Belly dancing is seen as fun not exercise and, unlike other forms of exercise that require a certain level of skill or fitness or a particular body shape, belly dancing is inclusive. It connects women of all ages, sizes, and cultures and creates a social network that supports ongoing participation in the activity. It is thus able to engage and sustain some of the inactive members of the community.

Despite having minimal time for promotion, the number of women who attended the workshops exceeded expectations. At one venue over 40 women turned up, including 14 from a small town nearby who hired a bus for the occasion. Following the workshop the women stayed on for another couple of hours talking and laughing, connected by their shared experience of dressing up and belly dancing.

For some towns this was their first exposure to belly dancing and there was some initial trepidation about what it involved. Now the initial contacts have been made and people have experienced the dance form, future tours should be even better supported.

The number of children attending the workshops and haflas and the popularity of the children's belly dance classes with both the schools and the children was better than expected. In the school classes, after some initial shyness, all the kids got involved, even the boys. The opportunity for mothers and daughters to dress up and share a fun leisure activity was a significant factor in explaining the participation by female children at the women's workshops.

The ultimate aim of the tour was to develop a network of women throughout the Midwest, Gascoyne and Pilbara who would continue to meet, dance and celebrate together, and we provided most of the local co-ordinators with a copy of the music and choreography for 'Move It!' so the dancing could continue. There has been no formal evaluation of ongoing participation in belly dancing, but since the tour women in four communities (Carnarvon, Kalbarri, Shark Bay, Newman) have continued to belly dance and there have been requests from other communities for the dancers to return.

Three of the dancers from the tour are exploring the possibility of regular classes in the towns near Geraldton and also seeking funding for the development of a teaching video to send to other towns. A website with images from the tour has been created and funds are also being secured for a photo collage featuring the women and children who joined in the tour <http://members.dodo.net.au/~lizu/>. Plans are under way for a Midwest belly dancing festival titled, "The Goddess is Dancing," for September 2005.

## CONCLUSION

Thirteen per cent of the women who attended our classes did not usually exercise. Sedentary people, particularly those who are overweight, often lack confidence in being physically active.<sup>8</sup> They also do not see sport as an attractive option, so encouraging the sedentary to be active requires a new approach.<sup>17</sup> Belly dancing is perceived as easy and fun and seems to appeal even to people who see themselves as inactive and overweight. Although it demands vigorous physical activity, it creates social supports to sustain the behaviour change. It has the additional benefits of connecting women and enhancing their self-esteem and mental and physical well-being.

In an environment where inactivity and obesity have reached epidemic proportions and social connectivity is increasingly valued, belly dancing may provide an answer to those seeking a physical activity that has resonance with women in rural and remote communities.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## PRESENTER

**Marisa Gilles** is a senior lecturer with the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health in Geraldton, Western Australia. She has a medical degree, a Masters in Public Health, a Masters in Applied Epidemiology, and is a Fellow of the Australian Faculty of Public Health Medicine of the Royal Australian College of Physicians. One of her passions is belly dancing, which she has been involved in since 1994. She started belly dancing classes and established troupes in Carnarvon and Geraldton, and was one of the main dancers on the Libbyah Queen of the Desert Belly Dancing Tour, 2004.

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