

# SUCCESS STORIES IN INDIGENOUS HEALTH

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) will soon publish a booklet of *Success Stories in Indigenous Health*.

The booklet presents a range of successful Aboriginal community-controlled health care initiatives from around Australia.

These *Success Stories* show that Aboriginal communities *are* taking initiative in tackling health problems, and that significant progress in improving Indigenous health is achievable through increased funding and support for Aboriginal-controlled health care initiatives.

Most of the projects featured in the booklet are currently unsupported or under-supported by government, however they provide models which could be extended, replicated or adapted elsewhere for further success, given the right assistance.

ANTaR gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation and the Mercy Foundation, which made the *Success Stories in Indigenous Health* possible.

To obtain a copy of the booklet, phone ANTaR on 02 9555 6138.

# Infant and maternal health

## Healthy children: strong futures

### Mums & Babies Program

### Townsville Aboriginal & Islander Health Service

A major change in the way health care is provided to pregnant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Townsville is helping to turn around health outcomes for babies and infants.

Long waiting times and an historically unwelcoming hospital environment had kept many Indigenous women from using mainstream health services during their pregnancy, according to Dr Kathryn Panaretto, Senior Medical Officer with the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service (TAIHS).

“We wanted to create an environment where women felt comfortable, where they were treated as people and where they could bring children along,” she said.

With pilot funding from the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation and the Ian Potter Foundation, TAIHS established the Mums and Babies program in 2000 – a morning clinic for pregnant women and young mothers, initially staffed by two female doctors, two health workers, a child care worker and a driver.

The popularity of the program was immediate. In the first month of operation, the clinic saw 40 clients. A year later the number had grown to 500 clients each month. Five years later on – and now in a purpose-built family friendly

centre – the number of clients continues to grow steadily.

“We’re seeing more pregnant women, we’re seeing them earlier in their pregnancy and we’re seeing them more regularly,” says Dr Panaretto. “Having this sort of consistency means you can build a relationship with the women and talk with them about issues like smoking, alcohol and healthy eating.”



According to the Australian Medical Association, Indigenous babies are more than twice as likely to be born premature or underweight as non-Indigenous babies, placing them at higher risk of developing chronic illness such as heart disease, kidney

disease and diabetes later in life.

The major contributing factors to low birth weight babies include smoking, alcohol, sexually transmitted diseases and malnutrition in the mother.

However, since 2000 the health outcomes for Indigenous babies and infants in Townsville have improved markedly. There has been a reduction in low birth weight babies from 16 per cent to 11.7 per cent; mean birth weights have increased by 170 grams; and perinatal deaths have fallen from 58 per thousand to 22 per

thousand.

Word of mouth about the Mums and Babies program has been so positive that now one third of all women using the service come from outside of Townsville, says Melvina Mitchell, the Program Coordinator.

“We recently had a customer satisfaction survey and the feedback was all positive – the women told us they feel really comfortable coming here,



and the kids have a great time too. We’re even seeing fathers bringing their kids in too,” she said.

**According to Melvina, the attitude and commitment of the staff is the major reason why the program works so well. “The people who use the service like the fact that most of the staff here are Indigenous and they like seeing the same faces when they come in,” she said.**

A number of ancillary services have been established to support mothers and young

children, including programs to encourage breastfeeding, provide nutrition support, increase immunisation rates and monitor healthy child development, says Dr Panaretto.

“If you’ve got a good model of health care, then people will feel comfortable coming to see you,” she says. “That really goes to the heart of what we’re doing here – trying to build a culture of using health care among the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.”



### Find out more

Townsville Aboriginal & Islander Health Service

Web: <http://www.taihs.net.au>

Phone: 07 4759 4000

Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Care – online video presentation, provided by the Rural Health Education Foundation; <http://www.rhef.com.au/programs/509a/509a.html>

# Nutrition: at the heart of good health

Chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart diseases are the principal causes of early death among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Health professionals unanimously agree that improving diet and nutrition is the fundamental starting point to tackling these problems.

Removing barriers to obtaining healthy food and promoting healthy nutrition among Indigenous families are key goals of the National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan 2000-2010.

The Action Plan notes that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly those living in remote areas, do not have the same opportunities as other Australians to obtain affordable and healthy food. In some remote communities food can be up to 150% -180% more expensive than in the major centres.

The aim of the Action Plan is to support communities to develop and deliver effective healthy lifestyle programs in a broad range of settings, such as childcare centres, cultural and sporting events, schools and aged care services.

## We practice what we preach

"Relationships are at the heart of everything we do," says Brett Morris, who heads up the Jalaris Aboriginal Corporation in Derby, in the far north of Western Australia.

**"Family and community is the same thing here," he says. "We live in the community, we work in the community. Our kinship with the community is the most important thing we have. We wouldn't be able to achieve anything without the trust and respect of the people."**



Since 1994 Jalaris has been helping to improve health and nutrition levels in Derby, with a particular focus on boosting child nutrition.

Brett and his wife Bidy began by operating (voluntarily) a low-cost food and clothing store. This was followed by a commercial kitchen to provide cheap meals for the community.

The high level of demand on the kitchen showed a widespread community need for affordable, healthy meals.

In 2002 Jalaris received funding from the National

## Jalaris Aboriginal Corporation

Stronger Families Fund to establish a Drop-In Centre to provide healthy meals to children and young mothers.

"The Drop-In Centre was really successful at changing kids' attitudes to healthy food," said Brett.

"When we gave kids a stew they would eat the meat but then chuck the vegetables on the floor. Within twelve months they were eating everything we gave them.

"And of course we saw immediate changes in the physical health of the children. They were more attentive and the infections and runny noses started to clear up."

However, there was a growing concern among Jalaris staff that the parents weren't attending with their children.

"Parents were dropping the kids off for child minding and then going elsewhere," says Maya Haviland, who has worked with Jalaris for many years. "We saw that we needed to work more closely with families to provide education around nutrition and healthy eating."

This included setting up a Women's Room in the Centre and running cooking classes and working with TAFE to provide a short course in nutrition. In 2004 - in association with Derby Aboriginal Health Service - Jalaris established a mobile nutrition and health van to visit and support families in the community.

**"Early intervention looks different in a place like Derby," explains Maya. "In this community, early intervention is making sure families and children have food to eat. Seeing that the food gets to kids is our first priority."**

The Action Plan is built on research into successful nutrition and health programs in Indigenous communities, which highlight the following 'good practice' elements:

- community involvement and support at all stages
- empowering the community rather than imposing priorities on the community
- multifaceted interventions
- monitoring and providing feedback to participants
- modifying strategies according to need.

Read more: *National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan 2000-2010*

"What we do is a necessary 'grass roots' response to the situation, but sometimes that can be hard to explain to a government agency that only wants to fund a 'top down' approach."

By building strong relationships and meeting the needs of families and children, Brett, Bidy and the Jalaris staff have seen real changes take place.

"Kids now come into our home looking for a piece of fruit or a glass of cold water," he says. "And kids



who used to truant now come to us at 7.30 in the morning – we give them some breakfast and then they ask if we'll take them to school."

Despite its successes, the long-term future of Jalaris remains unclear. Short-term and uncertain funding makes it difficult to develop and retain skills in the community to do this work.

"Sustainability is very important – without that we've got no hope," says Brett. "My wife Bidy and I are not getting any younger so we need people to take over from us. We need reliable funding so we can train local Indigenous people and pay them proper wages, otherwise they'll leave"

"A number of local young women would like to be trained up and work with Jalaris," adds Maya. "It's absolutely critical to invest in motivated young people and build community capacity to tackle its health problems."

#### Find out more

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[www.phaa.net.au/Advocacy\\_Issues/partnership.html](http://www.phaa.net.au/Advocacy_Issues/partnership.html)

Donations to Jalaris Aboriginal Corporation are tax-deductible.

## Positive life skills

# Putting the brakes on petrol sniffing

In the early 1990's Yuendumu, a remote Aboriginal township on the edge of the Tanami Desert, was gripped by an epidemic of petrol sniffing among young people.

By 1993 there were up to 70 regular 'sniffers', in a population of 400, and the community was suffering the fallout, including violence and property damage.

But in 1994, local Warlpiri Elders decided on a 'zero tolerance' approach to the problem. With the support of traditional owners, the local school, the Tanami Network and the local Community Government Council, young petrol sniffers were sent to Mt Theo

**"I was doing it myself... I took those kids to Mt Theo... and made them better... stronger... I made a life for all those kids, and they're all big now. Today, it's good for them. They're all married."**

*Peggy Nampijinpa Brown,  
program funder for Mt Theo*

Speaking at 10th anniversary celebrations, 2004

(Source: CAYLUS, English translation by Janet Nakamarra Long & Nancy Napanardi Martin)

Outstation – 160kms from Yuendumu and 50kms from the nearest main road – to recover, learn traditional culture and break their addiction.

At the same time, a comprehensive youth program was started in Yuendumu to offer young people active and healthy alternatives to petrol sniffing, and to support young 'graduates' returning from Mt Theo.

Within a decade, the program had reduced the number of petrol sniffers in Yuendumu to zero.

Extending on this prevention work, the *Jaru Pirrjirdi* program – which means 'strong voices' – is now working with young adults in the community to address the underlying causes of petrol sniffing and help develop a strong, skilled and dedicated group of young leaders for Yuendumu.

To date, the community-driven initiative has transformed the lives of more than 400 young Aboriginal people from communities in the region, and is regarded in Australia and overseas as a leader in petrol sniffing prevention.

The success of the Mt Theo Program comes from local Aboriginal people taking control and supporting one another, says Mt Theo Manager Susie Low.

"From the beginning, the community has upheld Warlpiri values and used culturally appropriate ways of doing the work. The program received no outside funding until 1997; and all the early work was

**It is a credit to Mount Theo and the youth diversionary programs that they have managed to do what no-one else has been able to do. The key to this is that the problem of petrol misuse has been owned by the local community and the response has come from the local community—and it has worked.**

*Dr Russell Thompson, WYNHealth Organisation*

Evidence to the Commonwealth Senate Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing, 2006

done on a volunteer basis. It is the families' combined strength and determination that has allowed this program to prosper"

"The zero tolerance approach and a solid model of early intervention means there is an immediate response for any young person engaging in petrol sniffing," said Ms Low

The program is now used as a model for other remote communities in the Northern Territory, where there is an estimated 600 addicted petrol sniffers and 120 people left brain damaged from the practice.

The 2006 Commonwealth Senate report into petrol sniffing highlighted the success of the Mt Theo Program and recommended that funding be made available to interested communities to develop programs based on the same principles of intervention and support.



# Mt Theo-Yuendumu Substance Misuse Aboriginal Corporation

## How does the program work?

### Mt Theo Outstation Program: Treatment & Diversion

By community consent, young sniffers are removed from their community and are sent to the Mt Theo Outstation for at least one month. Aboriginal Elders provide cultural healing and coordinate outdoor activities such as gardening and traditional hunting.

Non-Aboriginal youth workers visit the outstation approximately twice a week to deliver food and provide additional support. This has created an effective partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, with both groups sharing ideas

to engage young people in fun and healthy activities, reduce boredom and providing positive alternatives to petrol sniffing.

### Jaru Pirrjirdi 'Strong Voices': Youth Development Project

Extending on the prevention and treatment programs, Jaru Pirrjirdi works with young adults (aged 17-30 years) to address the underlying issues of substance abuse. This community leadership program aims to empower the young people to develop the necessary skills and capacity to be active leaders in their own communities.



**Jaru Pirrjirdi is more than about entertaining kids; it is about working with those kids to look at where they want Yuendumu to be in 10 years time and working towards achieving that. It is building up the leaders of tomorrow in a meaningful and sustained way.**

*Mr Tristan Ray, Central Australian Youth Link Up Service*

**Evidence to the Commonwealth Senate Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing, 2006**

and learning from one another.

After their time at the outstation the young people, return to the Youth Program (up to 17 year-olds) or are encouraged to join the Jaru Pirrjirdi project (17-30 year-olds).

Effective partnerships with law enforcement agencies, including the Yuendumu Police, have been established. Over the last few years, several young offenders who have been bonded by the courts have also been sent to Mt Theo Outstation.

### Youth Program: Prevention

Each day of the week, Indigenous youth workers run an activities program for the young people (aged 4-17 years) of Yuendumu and Willowra, including swimming, Auskick, singing, and dancing. The goal is

### Find out more

Mt Theo-Yuendumu Substance Misuse Aboriginal Corporation

Web: <http://www.mttheo.org>

Phone: 08 8956 4188

A wide range of newspaper articles, research papers, parliamentary reports and other resources looking at the Mt Theo program and other strategies to address petrol sniffing can be found at <http://www.mttheo.org/media.htm>.