



Cooperative Research Centre for
Aboriginal Health

Media Release

Addressing Aboriginal men's health

June 26 2008

A new book which offers insights into the culture, lives and health of Western Desert Aboriginal men will be launched in Broome tomorrow. ***Holding Men – Kanyirninpa and the health of Aboriginal men***, by Jesuit priest and medical anthropologist Brian McCoy explores how Aboriginal men of the Kimberly Western Desert understand their lives, their health and their culture.

In the book's introduction Brian McCoy writes that while the general poor health circumstances of Aboriginal people is well known "we actually know little about Aboriginal men and how they perceive well-being and illness".

The book aims to remedy that lack of knowledge by using conversations, stories and art to illustrate how Kimberley communities express cultural values and relationships through a term they describe as *kanyirninpa* or holding. This key value has sustained Aboriginal desert life for centuries.

Through examples as diverse as Aboriginal men's engagement with Australian Rules football, petrol sniffing and prison time, McCoy reveals the possibilities of how lasting improvements to Aboriginal men's health might be achieved.

While young Indigenous men's lives remain vulnerable in a rapidly changing world, McCoy believes that an understanding of *kanyirninpa* may provide the hope of change and better health for all and offers positive insights for all who want to 'grow up' young people.

"Addressing the growing health crisis in Aboriginal men requires understanding the beliefs systems, needs and aspirations of those men and there is little evidence thus far that our health systems are even listening to Aboriginal men let alone making efforts to understand them," said Brian McCoy.

"Although this book was written about the specific experiences of Kimberly desert men, Aboriginal men from across the country, in both urban and remote settings, have told me that they share similar views and experiences as their Kimberly brothers.

"While we know the health of Aboriginal men is generally poor, and often worse than Aboriginal women, we do not sufficiently understand the different ways in which Aboriginal men perceive their health. Nor do we understand how a Western model of health might engage more positively with Aboriginal men and their health needs.

"Through this research many of the reasons why desert men do not use clinics became evident. For example, clinics are largely perceived to be female spaces whose confines do not allow for the multiplicity of relationships desert people share. These relationships require recognition and negotiation, especially by young men after they become adult or *wati*. Thus, men prefer their own clinic space where they can be treated by other men.

phone (08) 89227954 • fax (08) 89227797 • email alastair.harris@crcah.org.au • website www.crcah.org.au
address The John Mathews Building, Royal Darwin Hospital, Rocklands Drv, TIWI NT 0810

In a lesson to agencies delivering health services to Aboriginal men McCoy argues that Aboriginal men must be heard and the cultural values that determine relationships must be understood.

“Men can find it hard to get non-Aboriginal people to understand and respect their cultural values,” said McCoy. “Programs that are imposed without the development of relationships, and which lie outside a culturally ‘safe’ place for Aboriginal men, prove difficult to develop and sustain.

“We will only witness improvements to Aboriginal health when we learn to recognise and build on the strengths that people already possess.”

Brian McCoy has spent most of his adult life as a priest and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In communities across north and remote Australia, in North Queensland, the Northern Territory and the Kimberley, he has been involved in a variety of roles including priest, ambulance officer, football coach, youth detention and adult prison chaplain and health researcher.

Brian McCoy is continuing his research work with the men of the Kimberly desert region as part of the CRC for Aboriginal Health-funded project - **Developing, sustaining and evaluating health programs for Aboriginal men.**

Holding Men – Kanyirninpa and the health of Aboriginal men will be launched Friday June 27 by prominent senior Kimberly leader, Patrick Dodson at the Lingiari Foundation.

Patrick Dodson believes there has been a process of undermining the role and status of Aboriginal men within our own society since the early days of Australia’s colonisation and continuing in recent commentary around the NT Intervention.

“We have been stereotyped as violent drunkards and abusers of our children so as to undermine our strengths, authority and responsibilities within our communities,” said Patrick Dodson. “Brian McCoy has recognised the reality of the role and responsibilities that reside with our men and placed them into a contemporary context, without denying the achievement of thousands of years of protecting families, caring for our lands, rivers and seas as well as sustaining law, language and culture.”

For further information

Call CRCAH Communications - Alastair Harris	0409 658 177
Aboriginal Studies Press - Rhonda Black	0417 424 429
Brian McCoy -	0438811803

Or go to:

http://www.crcah.org.au/research_progam_areas/downloads/114185_mccoyFactSheet-0308.pdf

Holding Men: Kanyirninpa and the health of Aboriginal men is published by Aboriginal Studies Press

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