



# Media Release

## Successes in Indigenous Mental Health

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Researchers will present good news on Aboriginal health in Cairns this week at a Far North Queensland showcase of successful health programs promoting Indigenous family wellbeing and mental health.

**Promoting Strengths: Working with Individuals, Families and Communities toward Better Health and Wellbeing** is the title of the showcase and discussion forum which will examine the use of empowerment approaches to promote social and emotional well being and mental health.

Hosted by the University of Queensland's North Queensland Health Equalities Promotion Unit and James Cook University and supported by the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (CRAH) and Queensland Health, the showcase will highlight a growing area of research and practice which North Queensland researchers and their Aboriginal health and community partners are being increasingly recognised for.

As Governments across Australia struggle with the challenge of closing the health gap, empowerment and the enhancement of Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing are acknowledged by health experts and Aboriginal people themselves as being one of the keys to success.

One of the programs being presented at the Showcase is the Family Wellbeing Program, developed by a group of Aboriginal people in South Australia who not only survived substantial emotional trauma of the Stolen Generation, but were also able to heal and become leaders in their communities.

The Program has been used to help groups and communities around Australia to address many health and social issues, including high rates of suicide in far north Aboriginal communities.

According to one of the empowerment research program leaders, Dr Melissa Haswell from the University of Queensland, evaluation of the Family Wellbeing Program has shown that participants experience profound changes in the way they see themselves, gaining greater sense of personal empowerment and control over their lives.

"Although it's not a "parenting program" *per se*, many participants described how they used the skills they learned in the program to build better relationships with their children, partners and families, Once they are able to begin healing from painful experiences in the past, they gain greater energy to work towards a more positive future for themselves and their communities. Many have gone on to enroll in University courses and seek more meaningful employment." said Dr Haswell. "Profound changes like this are the best protection against ideas that suicide is an option. The success of this and other similar programs across the country needs to be better reflected in Indigenous mental health services and policies."

Further success stories will be presented by researchers from the CRAH-funded program Let's Start and three groups involved in the Australian Integrated Mental Health Initiative (AIMhi) based in Indigenous, rural and high support settings in the Northern Territory, Queensland and New South Wales.

Let's Start, based at Charles Darwin University, promotes positive parent–child interaction, improves children's social and emotional competencies and helps reduce parent anxiety.

The AIMhi project has developed many new tools and service methods to work with clients and their families to assist them to identify their strengths and set goals to improve their mental health and self-management skills. This helps clients to choose better ways to deal with their illness, avoiding alcohol and marijuana, and becoming engaged in activities in their communities.

The Showcase grew from a need for the University teams in partnership with the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health to:

- share learnings from the current research programs with the broader community,
- bring together insight from a range of complementary work of the North Queensland groups, Northern Territory University, Menzies School of Health Research and Wollongong University
- actively seek ideas from the broader community on how to progress from here.

The day will also see the launch of one of the AIMhi projects key products - a book of guidelines to enable health centres and mental health clinicians to help people with wellbeing and mental health problems. Experts say this book fills a major gap in mental health service delivery and will lead to improvements in how primary health care services address health problems in Indigenous communities.

CRCAH Chief Executive, Mick Gooda, said the treatment of Aboriginal mental health across the country would be significantly enhanced by the introduction of these protocols into services.

The book, "Protocols for the Delivery of the Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Services in Indigenous Communities" was developed over six years of research and consultation in Far North Queensland with funding from Queensland Health. It is a resource for education, training and practice and, through the generous contribution by the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists and their associates; it also contains evidence-based guidelines for addressing common mental disorders. The book has already attracted significant national attention as it appears to be among the first of its kind.

The Showcase and launch will be held at the Crowther Lecture Theatre at James Cook University from 8:30 to 5:00 on 23 April and attended by more than 120 people working across a range of social and mental health programs and services from across Australia. Members of the public are welcome to attend.

**What: Promoting Strengths Showcase**  
**Where: Crowther Lecture 2 (Building A3), James Cook University, Cairns**  
**When: 8.30 – 5.00 Thursday April 23**

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