

Media Release

Book Launch

Trachoma program thirty years on – lessons still to be learned

December 3, 2008

As the Medical Journal of Australia reports that trachoma remains endemic in many remote Aboriginal communities, the first insiders' account of the famous 1970s National Trachoma Eye Health Program led by Fred Hollows will be launched in Canberra tomorrow.

Beyond Sandy Blight: Five Aboriginal Experiences as Staff on the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program by Jilpia Nappaljari Jones, Trevor Buzzacott, Gordon Briscoe, Reg Murray and Rose Murray is the first time Aboriginal members of the original trachoma team have documented their experiences of the groundbreaking health program more than thirty years ago.

Sandy Blight was the term white people gave to trachoma – a disease that was eradicated in white Australia in the 1920s but remains endemic in many Aboriginal communities as reported in the October edition of the MJA.

More than thirty years after the National Trachoma Eye Health Program (NTEHP) commenced, the program still sets a benchmark for quality Aboriginal health interventions and provides strong lessons for health agencies and planners on how to engage with Aboriginal people and communities to ensure real health outcomes result.

In deeply personal accounts, the NTEHP Aboriginal veterans describe how the program, in a radical departure from previous health programs, was characterised by respect for Aboriginal people and culture, an assurance that there would be "no survey without service", equality within the team and a strong commitment to Aboriginal engagement and leadership within the program.

According to author and team nurse, Jilpia Nappaljari Jones, the program's significance was not just in its extensive treatment program but also in the way the program was run; in the way that Aboriginal staff were considered to have important knowledge essential to the program's success and in some of the program's "conditions".

In particular those employed on the program decided that the old ways of describing Aboriginal health problems without offering solutions were not good enough.

"This.....was an important consideration because for many years 'white-fellers' had been surveying the health of us 'blackfellers' but not providing a service to correct the ill-health they found. This unequal power relationship didn't get us anywhere," wrote Jilpia and Leila Smith in the book's introduction.

Beyond Sandy Blight is more than an historic documentation of one of Australia's most significant and famous public health interventions; it's a chronicle of five lives forever changed by the experience of working together in a collaborative and empowering way. It documents the appalling living conditions of Aboriginal people encountered by the program team across Australia; it describes the obstacles encountered by the team in simply trying to deliver an effective and compassionate health service to Aboriginal people living in environments marked by brutal racism and ignorance.

The NTEHP truly changed the boundaries of Aboriginal health service delivery in a profound and radical way and set benchmarks of community engagement and empowerment that many health programs are still unable to meet thirty years later.

“Some work has been done to continue Fred’s work, but Indigenous peoples across Australia still have the highest rate of trachoma infection in the world,” writes Fred Hollow’s co-director Professor Gordon Briscoe in his chapter. “The trachoma program went to every Aboriginal camp and community, treating both white and black persons, thereby lighting a fuse that promoted Indigenous ‘self-determination’ and, to some degree, by their involvement put Aboriginal health in the hands of Indigenous people themselves.”

Beyond Sandy Blight: Five Aboriginal Experiences as Staff on the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program will be launched by Professor Hugh Taylor, Founder and Managing Director of the Centre for Eye Research Australia, Head of the Department of Ophthalmology, University of Melbourne and one of the world’s foremost authorities on trachoma at the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) on Thursday December 4.

Professor Taylor, who himself worked as an ophthalmologist on the NTEHP, said that he was not entirely aware of the unique nature of the program until he read the accounts contained in the book. “It’s a moving account of what a profound effect this experience had on my young colleagues,” he said. “It wasn’t until I read their accounts that I fully understood the transformational nature of those experiences back in the 1970s.”

It is the transformational nature of the original trachoma program and the vision of its driver, Fred Hollows, reflected in this book which makes it such an essential contribution to the history of Aboriginal health.

As Trevor Buzzacott points out in his chapter, “The experiences and events resulted in an unbelievable impact that changed us forever. Many Aboriginal communities and individuals were part of this program. The engagement and contribution of Aboriginal workers resulted in significant epidemiology data collection and opportunities to construct better programs and services.”

Welcoming the book’s launch, CRC for Aboriginal Health CEO, Mick Gooda, said it was an invaluable contribution to better understanding of what constitutes successful interventions in Aboriginal health. “This program set the standards for effective engagement with Aboriginal people, for building Aboriginal capacity and for highlighting the links between our ill-health and the shocking living conditions so many of our people endure,” he said.

What: Launch of *Beyond Sandy Blight: Five Aboriginal Experiences as Staff on the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program*
Where: Mabo Room, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Lawson Crescent, Acton Peninsula, Canberra
When: 10 am Thursday 4th December 2008

Pre-launch review copies of *Beyond Sandy Blight* and interviews with the authors are available by contacting:

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