



the
Lowitja
INSTITUTE

Australia's National Institute
for Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Health Research

Research

AT THE LOWITJA INSTITUTE



A Unique Approach

Closing the Indigenous health gap within a generation is now a priority for all Australian governments. However, to achieve this goal it is vital we use targeted research to develop the evidence-based interventions that will provide the maximum benefit for individual and community health.

At the Lowitja Institute, which incorporates the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (CRCATSIH), we are building a research program on priorities identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and by our industry partners, such as community controlled health services, which can make use of the research.

Following in the footsteps of the previous CRCs,* we are also ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a direct say in *how* we do the research. We do this by following our own unique research philosophy—the **facilitated development approach**. This approach is very different from more ‘traditional’ research practice in which researchers increase their academic record but the communities and organisations that are researched are left with no real benefits.

Our approach, however, places a high value on stakeholder involvement at every stage of the research—from deciding on priorities all the way through to implementing the results. In this way, the interests of researchers and the interests of Indigenous communities coincide.

Engaging stakeholders in shaping the research questions increases the likelihood that the results will be feasible and acceptable in Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander health care settings. It will enable us to continue to find solutions to the problems identified as priorities by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector, thereby assisting the sector to implement policy goals and programs in a more timely way with a greater focus on delivery.

Capacity development is also built into all our research. This involves building on the skills and abilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations to carry out, direct and use health research. It also builds the capacity of non-Indigenous researchers to collaborate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to undertake high-quality research that leads to community development and social change.

Capacity development is an essential part of the real engagement of Indigenous people and organisations, as well as other research users, in every stage of the research process. Increased capacity might involve developing workforce skills, management skills, partnerships and other resources. It includes education and training—such as traineeships and scholarships—that support Aboriginal people to begin careers in health and research.

One important innovation to further strengthen this approach is **Congress Lowitja**. The Congress will be held every two years and will provide an additional forum for community representatives, researchers, health services and hospitals, government agencies and other stakeholders to help shape our research agenda.

* CRC for Aboriginal and Tropical Health (1996–2003) and CRC for Aboriginal Health (2003–2009).

The Research Agenda

The overarching strategy for our 2010–2014 research agenda is to produce the knowledge, tools and resources by which those who use the research, such as primary health care providers, can enhance positive health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We have a particular focus on implementation research to ensure interventions with demonstrated efficacy are embedded and scaled up within health systems. However, we will also invest in developing new knowledge and evaluating interventions in response to emerging priorities.



Program 1: Healthy Start, Healthy Life

PROGRAM LEADERS: Ross Bailie & Tom Brideson

What's the Program about?

Healthy Start, Healthy Life is about making sure that primary health care and health-related services are able to access and use innovations that will help them provide the best quality care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The program will build on successful developments in biomedical, clinical and social research, with a focus on implementation research that fosters further innovation in this area.

- Reducing risk associated with tobacco consumption, obesity and diet.
- Improved early detection and effective management of chronic diseases.
- Better maternal and child health outcomes (e.g. improved foetal health and birth-weight, and reduced childhood infections, infant mortality, and maternal morbidity and mortality).

Scope of the Program

Research carried out by the CRCAH and others has produced a range of tools and resources to support high-quality health care proven to be effective in various settings. Program 1 will support the use of such innovations through two interwoven strands of activity:

- Developing knowledge and capacity for effective implementation of innovations through high-quality research, evaluation and knowledge exchange.
- Supporting the implementation of specific evidence-based innovations.

Research projects

Some key projects within Program 1 will be:

- Establishment of an Australian Indigenous arm of the International Tobacco project.
- Ongoing work to support improvements in quality of care by the Indigenous health sector, including:
 1. A national appraisal of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) initiatives.
 2. Increased research capacity to support Indigenous primary health care centres to make improvements in quality of care at the regional and local level, through a National Partnerships project (leveraging NHMRC and industry funding contributions).
 3. Development of new tools that can be applied through CQI initiatives, such as a tool that supports best practice care around the social and emotional wellbeing of children.
- Transition of three successful social and emotional wellbeing projects from research to applied and sustainable innovations for use in local communities:
 1. Resilience and parenting training—developed by the Let's Start program at Charles Darwin University in Darwin.
 2. Facilitation training to deliver two empowerment interventions, the Family Wellbeing program and the Men's Group program—developed by a partnership centred at Townsville's James Cook University.
 3. Indigenous mental health care planning and other techniques—developed through the AimHi project.

Program 2: Healthy Communities and Settings

PROGRAM LEADERS: Leisa McCarthy & Kevin Rowley

What's the Program about?

Healthy Communities and Settings is about addressing health through a community and family focus, and ensuring that health promotion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people includes innovations at the broader community and social level. An individual's health and wellbeing is strongly associated with the wellbeing and resilience of the communities in which they live. Improvements in individual health are more likely to be sustained over the long term when the social and physical environment is positive and supportive.

Program 2 activities will centre around the social determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. Some of the broader social and environmental factors identified as important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health include:

- Relationship to land, country, place.
- Connectedness to community and family.
- The impact of racism and discrimination.
- Self-determination and community control.
- Identity.

Scope of the Program

Research results underscore the requirement for complex, community-led innovations to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through supporting healthy social and physical environments. However, the systematic establishment and evaluation of such innovations is currently lacking. Program 2 will address this

knowledge gap through basing activities on the outcomes of both the CRCAH Social Determinants of Health and the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Programs. This will lead to:

- An increased understanding of the determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health in regionally defined settings through the development and use of tools that more accurately measure identified enabling environments for better health outcomes.
- The development of tools for auditing and monitoring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health determinants and outcomes, and the evaluation of interventions across a range of community, service delivery and policy settings.

Research projects

Some key projects within Program 2 will be:

- An evaluation of local government initiatives to reduce structural, race-based discrimination in their local communities.
- The establishment and evaluation of a regional Indigenous Health Promotion Network across community controlled organisations.
- An investigation of food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban areas.
- The development of feasible indicators of healthy environments based on the outcomes of these research projects, for use by community controlled and other organisations, researchers and policy makers.
- Workforce training packages for the implementation and monitoring of health promotion initiatives that address the complex determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

Program 3: Enabling Policy and Systems

PROGRAM LEADERS: Alwin Chong & Judith Dwyer

What's the Program about?

Enabling Policy and Systems is about addressing the fundamental constraints and challenges that contribute to poor performance in Indigenous health policy and programs. Its focus is on aspects of health care systems and health policy that are known to be important current barriers against, or potential contributors to, improvements in Indigenous health. The Program aims to develop knowledge and to evaluate tools and resources that will enable end-users both to reform health system policy and administration and to improve capacity to implement programs effectively.

Scope of the Program

Research, capacity building and transfer/utilisation activity will be undertaken across three main areas:

- Decision-making and policy and program planning and implementation by governments.
- The capacity, composition and structure of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce.
- Organisational effectiveness in Aboriginal community controlled health services, and other health care providers.

Research projects

Some key projects within Program 3 will be:

- Health policy and program effectiveness, including:
 - » stewardship for Indigenous health and health care;
 - » methods of strengthening the links between health system performance measurement and policy action for Indigenous health; and
 - » requirements for good practice in cross-portfolio programs and processes for Aboriginal health.
- Indigenous health workforce, including:
 - » resources supporting good practice in workforce recruitment and retention; and
 - » knowledge about effective and ineffective policy instruments for improving the Indigenous health workforce.
- Organisational effectiveness in health care for Indigenous people, including:
 - » evaluation of trials of improved contracting between funders and Aboriginal community controlled health services (and other providers);
 - » end-user needs for integrated primary health care data systems; and
 - » improving capacity in hospital care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

For more information about The Lowitja Institute please go to our website at:

www.lowitja.org.au