



Empowerment as a Key to Improving Indigenous Health and Wellbeing

Project no. 103

What's the project about?

Empowerment programs seek to encourage people to take control of their own lives. There is considerable international and national evidence that interventions which empower socially excluded groups can be linked to health outcomes and quality of life.

The Empowerment Research Program is a 10-year program of work that includes:

1. Implementation and evaluation of empowerment interventions with Indigenous communities.
2. Development of tools to better understand and measure empowerment processes and results.

The empowerment interventions

At the centre of this project are two programs that have been developed, adapted and evaluated in a range of Indigenous communities. These are the Family Wellbeing Program (developed by the Aboriginal Education Program in Adelaide with survivors of the Stolen Generations), and Men's Groups.

Evaluation shows that these two programs have been highly successful in building self-worth, resilience, problem-solving abilities, self-awareness, and a sense of being able to bring about change. Participants began to address issues they had not previously been aware of, changed the way they related to others, functioned better at work, and recognised and addressed problems in their own families. Many went on to higher education or to run other community programs.

The Family Wellbeing Program is increasingly being sought by organisations looking for more effective ways of delivering services in Cape York, rural New South Wales and Central Australia, including in health services, schools and prisons.



Members of the Empowerment project team meet in Cairns

The project has now developed a training package for facilitators to deliver the Family Wellbeing Program, so that it can be taken up in more communities. The training program provides a consistent but flexible content that can be adapted to local needs.

Understanding and measuring empowerment

Work is currently being done on a quantitative tool to measure empowerment outcomes for individual, organisational and structural levels. This tool will enable cost benefit and sustainability analysis of empowerment interventions, based on aspects of empowerment as defined by Indigenous people, and may eventually be used across health promotion and community development activities more broadly.

Who's involved?

- James Cook University
- University of Queensland
- Health services and health councils in Cape York, Yarrabah, Kempsey, Dalby
- Tangentyere Council, Alice Springs
- Men's groups in Yarrabah and Innisfail
- Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health Queensland
- Hope Vale, Pormpuraaw and Kowanyama Communities, Far North Queensland
- Queensland government agencies, including education and health
- CRC for Aboriginal Health

Implications of findings for policy and practice

- The empowerment interventions developed around the Family Wellbeing Program over more than a decade have been demonstrated to bring about powerful changes in individuals and communities and enabled them to take control of their lives. Development of a training package for facilitators means there is now a means to help spread the program to more communities and organisations.
- The development of tools to measure the impact of empowerment programs will help to validate the embedding of such programs in core service provision, enabling evaluation of outcomes to meet government requirements for accountability.

Empowerment program taken up in Queensland schools

The success of the Family Wellbeing Program in far north Queensland is now spreading into Cape York schools.

Adults who had previously experienced the benefits of the program asked that it be adapted for the needs of remote area Indigenous students.

This adaptation was carried out, and an evaluation of the program found that it increased analytical and reflective skills, and produced positive behaviour changes for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students who took part.

The Queensland Department of Education and the Arts was approached to incorporate the program into the school curriculum. The department took the proposal even further, building an entire term of the Year 7 curriculum around what they have called the Making My Way Through unit. This unit was trialled throughout Cape York schools during 2007.



Lyndon Reilly and artist Connie Richards from Yarrabah



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