



How Do We Improve the Health of Aboriginal Men?

Project 114: *Kanyirninpa*: Health, masculinity and wellbeing of desert Aboriginal men; and

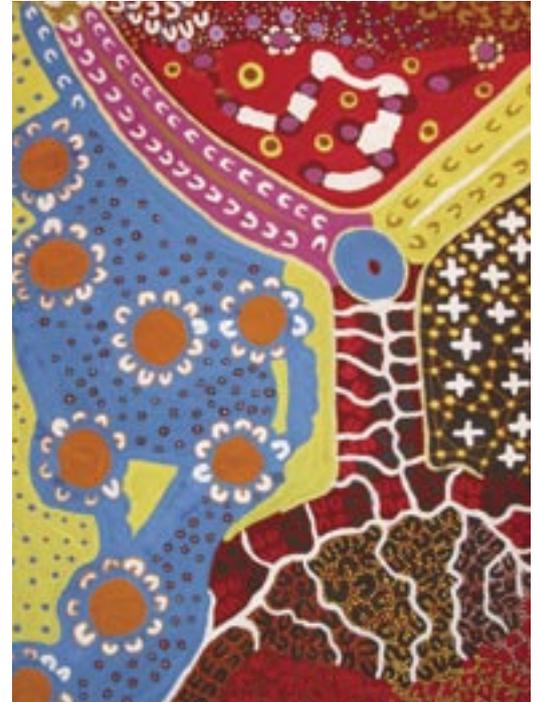
Project 185: Developing, sustaining and evaluating health programs for Aboriginal men

What's the project about?

These projects aim to address those underlying causes that lead Australian Aboriginal men to have an average life expectancy that is 17 years less than that of non-Aboriginal men. The first research component sought to express what a group of desert men understood by the English word 'health'. This led to a detailed description of the cultural value of *kanyirninpa*, often translated into English by the word 'holding'. The second research component sought to develop with the men a number of 'health' programs based on their understanding of 'health'. As men identified the need to have a social and clinic space that was culturally 'safe', they identified music, sport and bush trips as also important. They endorsed the work of traditional male healers but also the ways in which appropriate clinic care can support men's health during annual law ceremonies.

Who's involved?

- Aboriginal men of the Kutjungka region (Kimberley, WA)
- Palyalatju Maparnpa Health Committee (Kutjungka region, WA)
- Funding support through the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)
- University support through the Centre for Health and Society at The University of Melbourne and the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University
- Transfer of knowledge through the CRAH, which supported travel to Melbourne for the men involved from the Western Desert to share their story with other men's groups, and learn from men's groups and services



Cross Roads: This painting by four Aboriginal men describes the potential pitfalls and opportunities faced by young Aboriginal men as they navigate a safe pathway into adulthood.

Outcomes

The first part of the project led to the development of a community report and a poster book. It sought to return to the men the key messages they identified as critical for their health. This has now led to the publication of *Holding Men: Kanyirninpa and the Health of Aboriginal Men*, which AIATSIS will release in May 2008.

The second part of the project remains a slow and gradual process. Men have identified some key projects that, through an action-research process, they wish to develop. However, within this process a number of difficulties and obstacles to achieving sustainable programs have emerged. These include a high turnover of non-Aboriginal male staff, a lack of funding for men's health programs, and the absence of a designated male 'space' for men to meet and develop their capacity around these programs.

Implications of findings for policy and practice

At the heart of *kanyirninpa* are cultural relationships that continue to sustain men's health and the key values they wish to pass on to the next generation. These values provide a positive base for developing health policies and programs, but also a transfer of benefits to men's wives, children and communities.

Modernity presents a difficult challenge for many Aboriginal men and their sustaining of *kanyirninpa*. Not only are men faced with the constant turnover of male clinic and other staff in their communities, but they can find it hard to get non-Aboriginal people to understand and respect their cultural values.

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.

The first project began in 2001 and was completed through research transfer activities in 2005; the second project began in 2006 and will be completed in early 2010.

The painting to the right by one of the participants in the *kanyirninpa* project describes three key moments in his life story: getting into trouble as a teenager; being invited by older men to change his behaviour; and finally getting married and having a child. In this final part of his life he now saw that he 'had a future'.



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