

Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health Facilitated Development Approach

A partnership between Aboriginal community organisations, government departments and research organisations, the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health understands that our research must be directed towards priorities identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and by those industry partners, such as health services, which can make use of the research.

To ensure Aboriginal direction of research priorities the CRCAH has developed a new approach to research projects aimed at leading to changes in policy, service delivery and how people behave. We've called it the **facilitated development approach**.

This approach is very different from the 'traditional' way research is carried out. All too often in traditional research the interests of researchers and the interests of Aboriginal communities do not coincide. Researchers may increase their academic qualifications but the communities and organisations that they researched are left with no real benefits. So instead of researchers putting forward proposals, the CRCAH works with the Aboriginal health sector to identify areas where research may be able to make a real difference. It then brings together researcher and industry partners to design and conduct the research and spread the results or findings. (When the CRCAH refers to 'industry partners' it means the Aboriginal community-controlled health sector; Aboriginal health organisations; as well as governments and other organisations with an interest in Aboriginal health.) When the CRCAH talks about how research can lead to change we often refer to **research transfer and capacity development**.

Research transfer is about getting knowledge and information out and in use in the community. That means ensuring the research is done in a way that makes it most likely to be relevant and of use – and to be used – to inform and bring about positive change.

This has led to a concerted focus at the beginning of a project to make sure it's designed to translate into policy and practice. This means that Aboriginal organisations, individuals and other people most likely to use the research have to be involved from the beginning so that the research will result in findings that are useful and credible to the Aboriginal health sector. Aboriginal people, organisations and communities will then start to have a positive, informed view of research and how it can contribute to problem solving and social change.

The research we do is supplemented by **capacity development**. This involves building up the skills and abilities of Aboriginal people, communities and organisations to carry out, direct and use health research; and the capacity of non-Aboriginal researchers to work collaboratively with Aboriginal organisations and communities to carry out high quality research that leads to community development and social change.

Capacity development is an essential part of the real engagement of Aboriginal people and organisations, and 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 that support Aboriginal people to begin careers in health and research.

The following questions give some idea of what capacity development in research projects can entail.

- Does the project promote and involve Aboriginal contributions and leadership in each stage of the research?
- Are Aboriginal individuals and industry representatives effectively engaged in the research process?
- Are there opportunities for scholarships, traineeships and professional development for Aboriginal people?
- What are the training needs of the project team, including the training needs of Aboriginal industry representatives to effectively engage in the research and training needs of researchers to work in an Aboriginal context?
- Does the project help an organisation or community bring about change/improvements? For example, supporting Aboriginal organisations to understand and use research data to improve services.
- Does the project identify, demonstrate and evaluate how the health system can be improved? For example, by contributing to government policies on how research data is collected and used by health services.

When the CRCAH commissions new research it arranges an 'industry roundtable' where some 20-40 people from Aboriginal health and relevant government organisations meet with CRCAH program managers and leaders. Aboriginal health service managers and workers use their direct experience to discuss their most pressing needs to help them provide better services. The priorities the roundtable identifies are taken back to the CRCAH Board, which considers them and ranks them according to those in which the CRCAH can make the most impact. The CRCAH can draw on its partners to look at particular areas in which they have expertise. There may also be areas where a limited amount of money or effort can produce significant results by building on work that has already been done, or where it's the right time to do research.

The program leaders then turn the research priorities into research questions that are likely to produce results that governments and health services can use. The questions are circulated to the CRCAH community, inviting people to nominate as project leaders, team members or as reviewers. Project leaders are identified for each project, and the CRCAH's program managers and leaders help with forming teams around each research question. Each project development team, and ultimately each project team, consists not only of researchers but also members of the Aboriginal health sector and other relevant research users, such as government agencies.

The CRCAH approach ensures a decisive Aboriginal voice at all stages of research development: from the Board's prioritisation of research programs to the development of research program statements down to the refinement of research questions within those program areas. Experience has shown that Aboriginal direction of and participation in each step of the research process is most likely to ensure research that is appropriate, relevant and useful.

Aboriginal community-controlled health services, researchers and governments are not groups that communicate easily with one another. And within these groups there are other competing interests, including those of different levels of government, rival research organisations, and the diversity of Aboriginal cultures, including the diversity of urban and remote communities.

But one of the great strengths of the CRCAH's collaborative approach is the in-depth exchange of knowledge that comes from bridging different perspectives and bringing together divergent interests.

Evidence shows that personal relationships, particularly relationships of trust, are one of the most important tools for the transfer of research into policy and practice. This includes relationships with politicians, community members, relationships between researchers and research users, etc. The CRCAH approach is designed to build relationships between individuals through working together.

Given the bad reputation research has had with Aboriginal people, this approach is helping create a positive experience of research amongst people in Aboriginal health.

The CRCAH is keen to encourage the community of researchers and the wider CRCAH community to cooperate, not just in identifying research priorities, but also in shaping projects. This is a marked change from what usually happens: research planning is often a quite private activity involving a small group of colleagues.

We want to create an environment that is collaborative and developmental, while still focusing on the priorities the Aboriginal health sector has identified.

We have created a process for ensuring greater Aboriginal control of the research agenda and, although designed for health research, it may prove to be a model for reform of research processes throughout the various disciplines engaged in Aboriginal research.

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