



Cooperative Research Centre for  
Aboriginal Health

# Media Release

## UTOPIA LIFESTYLE HALVES MORTALITY

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New research published today in the Medical Journal of Australia has revealed a remarkably low death rate for residents of the Aboriginal community of Utopia in the Northern Territory, compared with the general Aboriginal population in the NT.

Data collected over two decades shows a consistent decline in the mortality rate for all Aboriginal people in the NT. However, the average adult mortality rate for Utopia residents over the period 1995-2004 was just over 1,000 deaths per 100,000 – nearly half that of the general NT Aboriginal population.

Made up of 16 homeland communities, Utopia is located north-east of Alice Springs on traditional Alyawarr and Anmatjerr traditional lands. The community-controlled Urapuntja Health Service supports Utopia's decentralised lifestyle by providing regular health care services to outstations.

Adult residents of Utopia have participated in community-based health surveys since 1988. Work by Kerin O'Dea, Robyn McDermott and other researchers, in collaboration with Urapuntja Health Service, has looked at diabetes and heart disease risk since that time. Earlier findings showed that between 1988 and 1995 there was successful prevention of diabetes and improvements in the risk of heart disease at Utopia, as indicated by:

- A significant fall in the prevalence of high cholesterol;
- No significant change in the prevalence of smoking for women (which stayed at almost zero prevalence);
- A significant fall in the prevalence of smoking among men;
- A significant fall in the risk of new diabetes, that is, a lower prevalence of impaired glucose tolerance (pre-diabetes), as well as;
- No change in the prevalence of existing diabetes;
- No significant change in the prevalence of obesity

According to Ricky Tilmouth of the Urapuntja Health Service, hunting and gathering on traditional clan lands has had a major impact on the community's health.

"People at Utopia have access to their traditional lands and hunt for food regularly, especially those on the more remote outstations," he said. The research has shown have seen that people who lived near the store tended to gain weight, but people on the other outstations successfully prevented weight gain.

"There is also a great sense of pride in the community's achievements and in the strong cultural practices that continue in Utopia."

The current work, led by Kevin Rowley at the University of Melbourne and Alex Brown at the Baker Heart Research Institute, looking at mortality and hospitalisation rates for the subsequent 10 years shows that from 1995 to 2004 death rates from cardiovascular diseases at Utopia were about half the rate for Aboriginal people in the NT generally. Likewise, hospitalisation with cardiovascular disease as the primary cause of admission occurred at a much lower rate for Utopia residents than for other Aboriginal people in the NT and was close to that for the NT's non-Aboriginal population.

Commenting on the work, Research Director for the CRC for Aboriginal Health Professor Ian Anderson said the results were remarkable, and possibly unique, because they occurred against a national trend to rapidly increasing risk of diabetes.

"There are a number of reasons for Utopia's success including the decentralised layout of the community which allows for greater access to traditional lands for hunting and gathering; a unique, proactive health service which travels to remote outstations and a high degree of personal mastery and control over life circumstances," said Professor Anderson.

Disempowerment is increasingly being understood as a major determinant of health said Professor Anderson.

"Mastery and control over life circumstances is a fundamental determinant of good health," Professor Anderson said. "People in Utopia have designed their own community; have freehold title to their land and control of the way health services are delivered."

Significantly, current Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows Utopia suffers a lack of housing, low average incomes, and low rates of paid employment comparable with other remote Aboriginal communities.

**More information:**

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**TV News Directors please note that vision of the Utopia community and interviews with community members and health workers are available. Contact Tiffany Manzies of Simon Says TV on 08 89 47 3535**