

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A successful engagement between a medical school and a remote North Queensland Indigenous community: Process and impact

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Introduction

The James Cook University School of Medicine and Dentistry is the only medical school in North Queensland. The School was established in 2000 with the mission to work with rural, remote, Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) and tropical populations. A significant proportion of the undergraduate learning at the School takes place in community settings, including fourteen weeks of rural placement across Years Two, Four and Six, and a one-week placement in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Control Health Service in Year Four.

In 2010 the School of Medicine and Dentistry expanded its community engagement by developing a systematic process for conducting face-to-face consultations with local Indigenous health workers in remote communities.

This study describes the process of how the School collaboratively established an Indigenous Reference Group with a cross-section of Indigenous (predominantly Aboriginal) health leaders, Elders and non-professional but highly valued community representatives in the remote North Queensland town of Mount Isa.

The university's research team included Ms Glenda Duffy, Ms Simone Ross, Dr Torres Woolley and Associate Professor Sundram Sivamalai, along with Indigenous academics Mr Donald Whaleboat and Ms Priscilla Page, who assisted with data analysis and advice on the cultural integrity of the project. Resource support in the form of a meeting room and administration for the project was provided by the Mount Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health (MICRRH).

The Mount Isa Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reference Group included Mr Ron Page, Ms Leanne Parker, Ms Nancy George, Mrs Renee Blackman, Miss Stephanie King, Mrs Caterina Walden, Mr Darren Walden, Mr Graham Page, Mrs Frances Page, Mrs Dolly Hankin, Ms Fiona Hill, Ms Kerry Major, Mr Shaun Solomon, Ms Elizabeth Dempsey and Mrs Mona Phillips.

Why was this project initiated?

Since its inception, the School of Medicine and Dentistry has established ad hoc relationships with individuals from local mainstream and Indigenous health organisations to facilitate student learning in regards to rural community placements, cross-cultural awareness, and rural, remote, Indigenous and tropical health.

In 2010 it was decided that the School should build stronger and long-lasting relationships with Indigenous health organisations and Indigenous health leaders by collaboratively establishing an Indigenous Reference Group in Mount Isa. The Reference Group would provide advice on culturally appropriate graduate attributes and better inform the School of the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes required of students to appropriately engage with local communities while on placement.

Aims and objectives

The main aim of the project was to build a sustainable and strong relationship with Indigenous health leaders in Mount Isa. The objectives were to:

1. Create a long-lasting connection between the James Cook University School of Medicine and Dentistry and the Mount Isa Indigenous community.
2. Improve program governance within the James Cook University School of Medicine and Dentistry and improve the quality of graduates working in North Queensland communities in a culturally appropriate way.
3. Build a set of good (and bad) engagement principles with the Mount Isa Indigenous community for university staff and students.

Approach to achieve aims and objectives

The project was developed utilising a participatory action research design. We recruited an Indigenous project officer, seconded from the State Government, who was a well-respected member of the local community (a Kalkadoon woman), with extensive experience in community engagement. The position was operational for the initial twelve months of the project to establish a reference group and mechanisms for communication and formal decision making on medical education and engagement with the local community. The project officer was responsible for approaching key Mount Isa Indigenous health workers to form the Indigenous Reference Group.

Reference Group members include Elders, community members and representatives from key health and wellbeing community organisations. Members were selected based on their previous engagement with the university, their willingness to volunteer time for the project and their active involvement and interest in Aboriginal health.

The Indigenous project officer and Indigenous Reference Group members then collaboratively developed Terms of Reference. These were based on the principal of reciprocal benefits and strategies to promote sustainability, and followed the National Health and Medical Research Council values and guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research. The Terms of Reference were used to guide the engagement process between the School of Medicine and Dentistry and the Indigenous Reference Group.

Facilitated by James Cook University staff, the group brainstormed statements of good and bad community engagement using the 'yarning circle' approach (roundtable discussions). This approach facilitates an exchange of views between people with different professional and non-professional expertise, in a manner where everyone is treated as an equal. This encourages participants to speak without fear of repercussion. One of the Terms of Reference developed by the Reference Group that assisted this process was 'Free dialogue and respect for all views, no matter if an Aboriginal Elder or junior health worker'. Indigenous Reference Group members agreed the yarning circle worked for their purpose of allowing all members to have an equal say in discussions.

Community engagement statements identified by the group were clustered into themes by the School staff assisted by the School's Indigenous academics. The themes were agreed by the group and when the project results were presented to the School, the Indigenous Reference Group attended via a video-conference link up.

Challenges

To ensure community needs were met, the project and the development of the Reference Group had a flexible approach. This, however, can create some challenges when there are competing work priorities. In initial discussions around forming the Reference Group, it was decided that meetings should be made at a time convenient for the community. To ensure that this occurred, James Cook University staff attended the community over a three-day period – a day before, the day of, and the day after the planned meeting – to be flexible and to respect any sorry business or other community priorities.

Successes

The School of Medicine and Dentistry received valuable feedback from the Reference Group about the undergraduate community placement and Indigenous Health Experience programs that were running in the Mount Isa area, with recommendations for how staff and students could better engage with Mount Isa Indigenous communities. Collaboratively, staff from the School and the Indigenous Reference Group also created a 'Black Engagement Mount Isa Indigenous Community' pamphlet, highlighting practical tips on how to engage with the Mount Isa Indigenous community. These are distributed to staff and students at the university who work or intend to work in the area.

The Indigenous Reference Group members received training and support from the School to ensure reciprocal benefits. This included:

- assistance to write an application for the Certificate IV in Indigenous Leadership Program at the Australian National University
- secretariat support, a meeting room and refreshments during the meetings
- support for media skills training
- assistance to organise an inaugural 'Healing Day Expo' for the Mount Isa Indigenous community.

What are the impacts?

One of the major impacts of the project has been the strengthening of the relationship between the School and the Mount Isa Indigenous community and community organisations. Clear protocols

around engagement, particularly in relation to student placements in community-controlled health organisations, have increased communication and understanding and provided further opportunities to collaborate.

The inaugural Healing Day Expo for the Mount Isa Indigenous community, designed to increase the health and wellbeing of a community that had recently experienced much sorry business, was hosted by the Reference Group, the School and MICRRH. The expo was linked to an annual football carnival, and successfully attracted many hundreds of participants. An informal evaluation on the day, completed by the eight participating organisations, provided an overall rating of nine out of ten for effectiveness in spreading the healing message. It is expected the Indigenous Reference Group will continue an annual Healing Day for many years to come.

The School of Medicine and Dentistry also now has a protocol for setting up an effective and sustainable engagement process with Indigenous communities. This protocol includes a complete list of good and bad engagement strategies for staff and students to consider when interacting with the Mount Isa Indigenous community. Staff and students who work with the Indigenous community are now more aware of the importance of building and sustaining individual relationships, good communication, establishing strong cultural and community foundations, and taking a holistic approach to treating Indigenous patients, while avoiding tokenism and racism.

MICRRH continues to take a role in maintaining the Mount Isa Indigenous Reference Group, and this support continues to increase MICRRH's profile in the local community, and the awareness of local health organisations about MICRRH training opportunities.

How has the project developed Indigenous leadership?

The project works on the premise that Indigenous leadership capabilities exist in local communities such as Mount Isa, and this project has enabled that capacity building through the development of a formal, interactive loop between the community and the School.

This project has directly resulted in the Indigenous Reference Group members having the skills and confidence to advocate for improving Indigenous health and social issues in Mount Isa, both with external organisations (such as the media and the local government) and internally (within the local Indigenous community). The Healing Day Expo was a great example of this. In addition, one Indigenous Reference Group member was assisted by the School to submit a successful application to the Australian National University Indigenous Leadership program in 2012.

What's next? Project sustainability

The Indigenous Reference Group was established to work with the James Cook University School of Medicine and Dentistry. It has since developed into a collective and representative health voice for the Mount Isa Indigenous community. The management of MICRRH has adopted the Reference Group as a key reference point in the community and, as stated above, has a staff member available in its organisation to support future Indigenous Reference Group deliberations.

As no two Indigenous communities or language groups are alike, the School is planning to conduct an Indigenous community engagement project in the Atherton Tablelands to determine if this Indigenous community has different views on how staff and students should engage with the community.

We are planning to measure the long-term outcomes of this project to assess success of community engagement approaches. We aim to measure this through future evaluations incorporating the views of students, community members, health workers and others.

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