

A healthy start to life: research as a strategy for change

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Professor Lesley Barclay is an educational leader, health services researcher and systems reformer whose projects have improved maternal child health services in urban and remote Australia and internationally. Much of her recent research has been rural, remote or Indigenous focused. She is a leading investigator on major research grants. Lesley's national leadership role is exemplified by her Council membership of NHMRC for 6 years and she served a similar time on the first Australian Council for Safety and Quality in Health Care. Similarly she has led projects for AusAID in maternal child health, WHO as a technical advisor and led a World Bank project in Indonesia designed to strengthen health worker education. She is currently a Board member on the Northern Rivers Board of Regional Development Australia. Lesley Barclay is known for her mentoring and training. This is exemplified by 12 of the 28 PhD students she has supervised over the last decade who have been appointed associate or full professors in midwifery. Professor Barclay has edited 2 books, written 3 book chapters and 40 refereed papers in the last 5 years.

Lesley was awarded an AO in 2004 in recognition of her contribution to professional and international development and child health. She is also a Distinguished Fellow of the Australian College of Midwives and is one of the few women designated a Samoan Chief; recognising her work in that country.

This paper shows how research can be used as a strategy to produce change when it is done in partnership with those receiving and those delivering health services. It uses a five-year NHMRC study being conducted in the top end of the NT to describe the process of bottom-up design and techniques that engaged and kept engaged those who will benefit most from the research. The 'Healthy Start to Life' project looks at services provided in the year before, birth, and the year after birth for remote living Aboriginal women and infants. I discuss how conventional research tools were applied in ways that gained active participation and commitment to change, built capacity and produced peer review tested results. The systems change introduced as a result of the study will be described.