

Gomeroi gaaynggal: a creative start to health, a healthy start to life

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Dr Kym Rae is an early career researcher who completed her PhD studies at the University of New England in early 2007. Her PhD work looking at predicting the onset of labour in women using the protein follistatin, provided a natural progression into her post-doctoral work aimed at reducing premature and low birth weight deliveries in Aboriginal communities. In her PhD studies she was short listed for both the Mayne Health Clinical Prize and the New Investigator award for Australian and New Zealand Placental Research Association. In 2005 she was awarded the Keith and Dorothea Scholarship that funded a university exchange to the Justus-Liebig Universitat in Germany.

She is a post-doctoral fellow in a unique position spanning the University Department of Rural Health (Tamworth) and the Priority Research Centre – Mothers and Babies Research Centre (John Hunter Hospital, Newcastle). Dr Rae has been instrumental in her role as the program coordinator of the Gomeroi gaaynggal program. This program is aimed at improving birth outcomes for Aboriginal mothers and their children. This project has a particular focus on early diagnosis and prevention of renal disease in both the infant and mother. Running parallel to this research project is a community-focused ArtsHealth program. The ArtsHealth program works with Aboriginal women in their pregnancy and post delivery. This program offers an informal creative environment whereby women can discuss healthy life choices under the guidance of health staff.

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Background and aims

The Gomeroi gaaynggal program is an ArtsHealth program based in Tamworth NSW that has been operating since July 2009. This program has sought to develop a culturally safe method of providing additional support to Aboriginal mothers in their pregnancy and following delivery. It is well established that a healthy start to life commences with a healthy pregnancy.

Methods

Discussion between local Aboriginal community members and the Gomeroi gaaynggal team led to the development of a program that provides an informal forum to facilitate health-related discussions. Using a team-based approach and creative activities, the women and staff work together, developing trust and mutual respect.

Results

The use of body casting, which includes hands and bellies, allow both physical and artistic connections to develop between the team and women involved in the program. Video and photographic storytelling has been an important documentary process for staff and participants. Both staff and the Aboriginal women have undertaken painting alongside Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists facilitators. Cooking and sharing meals together has been an ideal mechanism to relate stories, interchange cultural ideas, as well as develop health-related discussions around nutrition. In addition, health professionals visit the program and have been discussing issues, such as healthy pregnancy, fitness, nutrition and development of the baby. The mothers' artwork has been recently exhibited at the Tamworth Regional Gallery with more exhibitions booked in the near future.

Implications for practice

Through the established non-threatening environment, mothers are learning more about healthy lifestyle and the positive choices they can make in their lives. Our mothers have all developed creative skills and increased self-confidence. Through the community partnerships developed the local Aboriginal community and the research ArtsHealth staff are extremely proud of the achievements of the mothers to date. This presentation will discuss images from our successful exhibition, the program and how our team is working on evaluating our successes and failures.

