How traditional Aboriginal medicine can help close the health gap

27 April 2016

Aboriginal traditional healers should be given greater scope to practice their holistic healthcare treatments, a panel of leading health experts will argue at the University of Sydney this week.

At the bi-annual Poche Key Thinkers Forum on Thursday 28 April, Indigenous health experts will join traditional healers for a discussion about the role of the Ngangkari – traditional Aboriginal healers – and explore how ancient healing practices can work alongside western medical frameworks to help close the health gap.

“Traditional healers hold a deep cultural understanding of regional plants which can be effectively used in the treatment of common illnesses,” said panelist Professor Elizabeth Elliott AM from the University of Sydney Medical School.

“But traditional medicine encompasses more than physical health – it involves a holistic approach to understanding and treating the spiritual and cultural factors that cause disease and influence healing.

“Often female elders in remote communities also provide a valuable medicinal lifeline, treating common ailments with traditional bush medicine. We don’t give enough emphasis to traditional methods in our modern medical curriculum. To move forward non-Indigenous doctors must acknowledge that Western medicine is not the only way.”

Fellow panelist Dr Francesca Panzironi, CEO of Aŋangu Ngangkari Tjutaku Aboriginal Corporation (ANTAC) will argue that barriers including a lack of funding, inconsistent accreditation standards and the absence of a national Ngangkari register are limiting the potential for successfully including traditional Aboriginal medicine into mainstream practice.

“The way in which Indigenous traditional medicine has been integrated in national health care systems varies around the world. Many countries have established regulatory systems with formal recognition, promotion and financing of Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicine (TCAM). At the other end of the spectrum, there are countries in which the process of recognition and regulation has not yet begun, including in Australia,” Dr Panzironi said.
“Evidence-based analysis from a four-year research project in South Australia highlighted the potential benefits of a holistic two-way health care model, including a more comprehensive assessment of patients’ ailments, a reduction of cases of misdiagnosis, calming effects on patients, and enhancing compliance with western medical treatments.”

Panelist Dr Victoria Grieves, an Australian Research Council Indigenous Research Fellow, will draw on her research into Aboriginal philosophy and health policy to explain the importance of Indigenous wellbeing to the concept of ‘Closing the Gap’.

“The ‘Closing the Gap’ debate masks a far greater credibility gap that sees the cultural ways of Aboriginal people constructed as shallow, meaningless and worse, even toxic. Until this is addressed, we will continue to have the gap in indicators for healthy lives,” said Dr Grieves, an Honorary Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Sydney.

“Indigenous people at the United Nations established at least a decade ago that policies and programs addressing the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples underpin improvements in all indicators – social, economic, education, health, and mental health. It is clear that Ngangkari, being a part of cultural ways of healing, are crucial within our health system. Everything possible should be done to support them.”

The Poche Key Thinkers Forum panel includes:

- **Professor Elizabeth Elliott AM** – Sydney Medical School, University of Sydney
- **Professor Ngiare Brown** – Professorial Fellow, University of Wollongong
- **Dr Victoria Grieves** – Australian Research Council Indigenous Research Fellow; Honorary Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Sydney
- **Debbie Watson** – Ngangkari (Aboriginal Traditional Healer); Director of the Aṉangu Ngangkari Tjutaku Aboriginal Corporation (ANTAC)
- **Dr Francesca Panzironi** – CEO, Aṉangu Ngangkari Tjutaku Aboriginal Corporation (ANTAC)
- **Professor Tom Calma AO** (moderator) – Poche Centre for Indigenous Health Patron; Chair of the Poche Indigenous Health Network; Chancellor of the University of Canberra.

*This event will be live-streamed on Thursday 28 April at the following link: [http://webconf.ucc.usyd.edu.au/key-thinkers-close-the-gap-10yrs-2016-04-28/](http://webconf.ucc.usyd.edu.au/key-thinkers-close-the-gap-10yrs-2016-04-28/)

Co-presented by the Poche Indigenous Health Network, the [University of Sydney’s Poche Centre for Indigenous Health](http://www.usyd.edu.au/poche) and the University of Sydney’s Equity and Diversity Strategy.

**Event details**

**What:** Traditional Healing and Indigenous Knowledges – The Gap that’s missing?, a Poche Key Thinkers Forum event  
**When:** 9.00am to 12pm, Thursday 28 April 2016  
**Where:** Law School Foyer, Sydney Law School, University of Sydney  
**Cost:** Free, [online registration](http://webconf.ucc.usyd.edu.au/key-thinkers-close-the-gap-10yrs-2016-04-28/) requested

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