



NATIONAL RURAL
HEALTH
ALLIANCE INC.

ABN: 68 480 848 412

National Rural Health Conference
Australian Journal of Rural Health

PO Box 280 Deakin West ACT 2600

Phone: (02) 6285 4660 • Fax: (02) 6285 4670

Web: www.ruralhealth.org.au • Email: nrha@ruralhealth.org.au

Supplementary Submission

National Mental Health Commission's Review of Mental Health Services and Programmes

May 2014

This Submission is based on the views of the National Rural Health Alliance but may not reflect the full or particular views of all of its Member Bodies.

Introduction

The National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA) welcomes this opportunity to provide a Supplementary Submission to the National Mental Health Commission's Review of Mental Health Services and Programmes.

This Supplementary Submission discusses possible ways to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including through the views of older Aboriginal people outlined in *The Elders' Report into Preventing Indigenous Self-harm & Youth Suicide*, and through arts in health activities.

Background

The NRHA acknowledges the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as custodians of their country in Australia for tens of thousands of years, the significance of their customs, language, ceremonies, lands and seas, and the links between those things and people's social and emotional wellbeing.

Stories dating back many years of deprivation and ill treatment towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are legion: dispossession, brutal colonisation, harsh government policies and underlying racism towards Indigenous Australians have resulted in inter-generational trauma, high rates of unemployment, poverty and social marginalisation. More recently, higher rates of alcohol and drug abuse, especially among young Aboriginal people, are highly concerning. Suicide rates have increased over recent years in epidemic proportions, devastating families and communities across Australia's Top End where various communities have some of the highest rates of youth suicide and self-harm in the world.¹

Based on 2007-2011 figures, the 2012 Northern Territory Legislative Assembly report, *Gone Too Soon: A Report into Youth Suicide in the Northern Territory*, notes: "...the highest statistics in regard to Aboriginal suicide are with young people between the ages of 15 to 25 years."

Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Gooda, is among those who lament such human tragedy and waste of human capital.

The Elders' Report into Preventing Indigenous Self-harm & Youth Suicide

The consistency in the Elders' messages in *The Elders' Report into Preventing Indigenous Self-harm & Youth Suicide*, is striking in their emphasis on the importance of empowering communities, strengthening cultural identity and bi-cultural education, maintaining Indigenous languages, encouraging culturally-appropriate employment, and that Aboriginal people are the best placed to identify the causes of problems and deliver solutions.

Another theme throughout the report is the need for mainstream Australia to recognise the distinct cultural differences between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal and Torres Strait

¹ Gooda, Mick (2014), Forward in *The Elders' Report into Preventing Indigenous Self-harm & Youth Suicide*, developed in 2012-2014 by the Indigenous led social justice organisation, People Culture Environment, in partnership with Our Generation Media.

Islander people and for partnerships to be formed, both in identifying the problem and in helping to deliver solutions; and that support be provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for their work to help younger family members.

While the importance of governments and institutions including the courts, police and medical services are acknowledged in bringing their vision to fruition, the Elders also emphasise the need to respond differently to what may have been done in the past and to listen to community leaders and value their expertise. Of particular concern to the Elders is that Indigenous community leaders' voices are often lost among the views of professionals, bureaucrats and other influential people.

The Elders know the potential of cultural identity in helping to build resilience in their communities, including in advising on ways to generate income and create jobs and activities to help young people break the cycle of negativity. The Elders are equipped to build resilience among others, including through their teachings, ceremonies, culture, land and their spirit, as well as in imparting practical knowledge on traditional skills in fishing, hunting and gathering, languages, cooking and cultural knowledge.

The Elders cite examples where less alcohol abuse, fewer suicides, higher rates of employment participation and school attendance have been achieved in some communities. Programs such as the Kimberley Aboriginal Lore and Culture exemplify where reconnecting young people with their culture and major program initiatives that take young people out to country have helped them to lead positive lives.

Various culture camps have helped young people and resulted in better social and emotional wellbeing. They include Yiriman Kids, where children with learning difficulties can sit down and listen to the Elders and gain an understanding of the origins of their various members.

The Elders also suggest practical ways to help deal with problems such as instigating night patrols outside mainstream hospitals and 24-hour patrols of local people who understand local problems.

Art therapy or creative recovery

Evidence consistently shows that participating in art projects can help with a person's mental health state, not only through the intrinsic value of producing the art, but also through participants' contributions towards developing social and economic capital.

Recognition of the importance of arts and health has gained momentum as a part of Australia's health policy. Australia's Health and Arts Ministers have endorsed a National Framework on Arts and Health which seeks commitments from Ministers to support and recognise the role of art in improving Australians' health and wellbeing.

Art has been shown to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait people living with mental illness. The Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) research report,² *Supporting healthy communities through arts programs*, has put forward strong evidence about links between the

² This is part of the Government's *Closing the Gap* initiative.

arts and physical and mental wellbeing and improved social cohesion and inclusion, including strong support for the benefits of arts in health and reductions in self-harming behaviours.³

Across Australia, traditional festivals and local gallery initiatives promote the maintenance and continuation of culture which have been valuable in some Aboriginal communities, especially those who have endured the forced removal of children or forced relocation. Music and theatre activities are successfully helping to re-engage students who, having left school prematurely perhaps, have gone on to achieve academically and in other ways.

The small Queensland town of Woodford hosts the annual Dreaming Festival featuring multiple art forms, ceremonies, comedy, a youth program and forum, and opportunities for mentoring and emerging artists, where the “positive visibility” of Indigenous cultures supports “the development of positive and coherent youth identity”. Such visibility has inspired fun and hope and facilitated intergenerational and intercultural exchange, and also contributed to economic development through the sale of art works.⁴

Another Queensland project, Creative Recovery, is a community-based arts initiative for Indigenous people with mental health problems. Piloted in a remote Cape York community and conceived some years ago through various Queensland government channels and agencies and communities, nowadays it works with many art organisations, artists and cultural workers. This initiative involves workshops to assist people in various ways to reduce the stigma of mental illness and build on their talent, skills and creativity, operating in various places such as Aurukun, Mornington Island and Doomadgee. The project has helped to achieve better recognition of local artists, improved the participation of socially-isolated individuals and resulted in an increase in numbers of people accessing appropriate medical assistance at local clinics.⁵

In Western Australia’s Upper Murchison region, the Wirnda Barna Artists art gallery has been providing a venue where Indigenous artists regularly paint, display and sell works. The program has also helped to improve intergenerational relationships. Painting opportunities have given participants the prized social label of 'Indigenous artist' and recognised the vital contributions that art brings to the town in tourism, wide-ranging economic benefits and a diverse range of social welfare, personal, community and health benefits.⁶

Queensland’s Marapai Ngarthathati Murri Women’s Group holds workshops in towns including Mt Isa, Djarrah, Boulia and Cloncurry, where local women gain support through Art for Healing, conducted by a local Indigenous Artist who also has professional mental health qualifications. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (including those who are homeless and/or have alcohol or drug problems) have been able to explore their

³ National Rural Health Alliance [Peter Brown] (2014), “Festivals are more than just fun”, *Partyline*, April 2014.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Hunter, Prof Ernest and Dyer, Geraldine (2009), “Creative Recovery: Art for mental health’s sake”, *Australasian Psychiatry*, 17:1, based on research originally presented at a conference, *Creating Futures: Research Practice and Policy for Indigenous, Rural and Remote and Island Nations Peoples*, Cairns, 2008.

⁶ National Rural Health Alliance [Peter Brown] (2014), “Festivals are more than just fun”, *Partyline*, April 2014.

emotional difficulties, grief and trauma through art projects. With strong local support, the workshops have helped people to develop their creativity to the extent that plans are under way to more actively showcase artists and their works.⁷

These are just some examples of the many arts and health programs which cater for communities across Australia.

Summary

The NRHA respects Aboriginal people's cultural expertise and their ability to assist Indigenous young people. We consider that their wealth of knowledge would logically underpin policies aimed at addressing mental health problems in local communities.

Concerted efforts from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are needed to address chronic, endemic problems and improve overall wellbeing and recognition that Indigenous people's needs should be addressed in a culturally appropriate way.⁸

Indigenous people need greater access to mental health services which are culturally-appropriate and the workforce capacity to meet the needs of Indigenous communities. Many community members cannot leave their communities and therefore cannot access any service.⁹

Arts-based projects have proven benefits in providing meaningful activity, recognition and support for people with mental health conditions, as well as economic benefits. This is line with the Backing Indigenous Art Strategy funded by Arts Queensland which aims to support a sustainable arts industry in these communities. With equal access to and affordability of programs, participation in arts programs has regularly shown that it can increase social inclusion. Being involved in art and cultural activities has real potential to help address some of the social determinants of health.

Recommendations

- Given the link between Aboriginal Elders' expertise in using their knowledge bases and cultural traditions to help build young people's resilience, governments need to support and trust the expertise of Aboriginal Elders and provide assistance and support to help them impart their cultural heritage and traditions to young Aboriginal people.
- Agencies with responsibility for devising and implementing policies in mental health, should take account of the demonstrated significant social, therapeutic and economic benefits of arts in health projects, so that the scope for such projects is further extended to assist people in Australia's rural and remote communities.

⁷ George, Lee (2013), "Marapai Ngarthathati Murri Women's Group", www.arttherapyblog.com/ptsd/art-therapy-aids-trauma-recovery...

⁸ Haswell-Eliins, M, et al, (2005), "Reflections on integrating mental health into primary health care services in remote Indigenous communities in Far North Queensland and the Northern Territory, *Australian Journal of Primary Health*, (11), 62-69.

⁹ Williams, Glenn (2010), 'Mental Health', *SBS Insight*, 27 July 2010.

Attachment

Member Bodies of the National Rural Health Alliance

ACEM (RRRC)	Australasian College of Emergency Medicine (Rural, Regional and Remote Committee)
ACHSM	Australasian College of Health Service Management
ACM (RRAC)	Australian College of Midwives (Rural and Remote Advisory Committee)
ACN (RNMCI)	Australian College of Nursing (Rural Nursing and Midwifery Community of Interest)
ACRRM	Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine
AGPN	Australian General Practice Network
AHHA	Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association
AHPARR	Allied Health Professions Australia Rural and Remote
AIDA	Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association
ANMF	Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (rural members)
APA (RMN)	Australian Physiotherapy Association Rural Member Network
APS	Australian Paediatric Society
APS (RRPIG)	Australian Psychological Society (Rural and Remote Psychology Interest Group)
ARHEN	Australian Rural Health Education Network Limited
CAA (RRG)	Council of Ambulance Authorities (Rural and Remote Group)
CRANaplus	CRANaplus – the professional body for all remote health
CWAA	Country Women's Association of Australia
ESSA (NRRC)	Exercise and Sports Science Australia (National Rural and Remote Committee)
FRAME	Federation of Rural Australian Medical Educators
FS	Frontier Services of the Uniting Church in Australia
HCRRRA	Health Consumers of Rural and Remote Australia
IAHA	Indigenous Allied Health Australia
ICPA	Isolated Children's Parents' Association
NACCHO	National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
NRF of RACGP	National Rural Faculty of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
NRHSN	National Rural Health Students' Network
PA (RRSIG)	Paramedics Australasia (Rural and Remote Special Interest Group)
PSA (RSIG)	Rural Special Interest Group of the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia
RDAA	Rural Doctors Association of Australia
RDN of ADA	Rural Dentists' Network of the Australian Dental Association
RFDS	Royal Flying Doctor Service
RHWA	Rural Health Workforce Australia
RIHG of CAA	Rural Indigenous and Health-interest Group of the Chiropractors' Association of Australia
ROG of OAA	Rural Optometry Group of the Australian Optometrists Association
RPA	Rural Pharmacists Australia
SARRAH	Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health
SPA (RRMC)	Speech Pathology Australia (Rural and Remote Member Community)

