

Aboriginal Suicide Prevention & Capacity Building Workshop 12-14 June 2007

Hosted by the Australian Govt Dept of Health & Ageing (DoHA) in collaboration with Suicide Prevention Australia (SPA) and an organising committee.

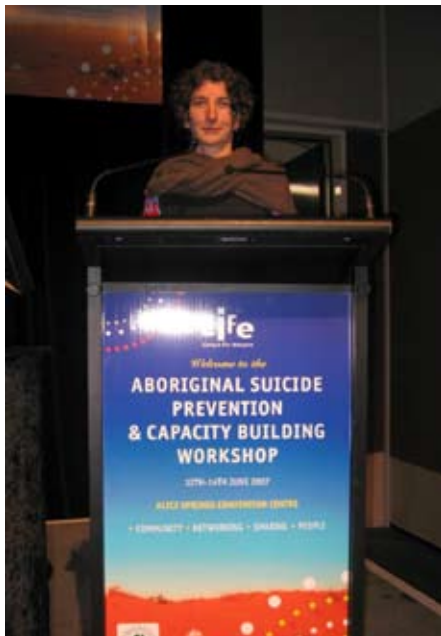


The Alice Springs Convention Centre was a fairly “flash” venue for our gathering on the sad but serious issue of indigenous suicide. It proved to be a welcome shelter, however from the cold desert climate of June. If the 3-day event wasn’t a conference, then what was the idea behind this smaller, invitation-only “workshop”? With a very short lead-up time consensus about the intent of the workshop was essential.

A need for more support

Since DoHA announced the most recent round of funding for suicide prevention activities in October 2006, concerns had been aired that so few funded projects addressed indigenous suicide in remote regions of Australia, in particular the Northern Territory. In the NT, Waltja’s “We Know Our Strengths Project” was the only major project funded. The NPY Women’s

Laurencia speaking at the workshop



Council received a small amount of funding for a significant project working with Anangu people.

It was agreed that it would be a useful exercise to bring people up to speed on the current thinking of some of the experts in the field of indigenous suicide prevention. It was also agreed that sharing local and interstate knowledge and current practises with each other would be worthwhile.

It was also a priority for DoHA to inform the audience as to the means to source funding and the necessary skills of submission writing, project management, reporting and financial accountability.

Suicide: a complex issue

Mick Adams of the Yadhigana people of Cape York and ties to indigenous communities in the NT was welcomed as our personable and engaging workshop convenor. Mick has spent many



Guest speakers Mick Adams and Prof. Ernest Hunter

years speaking out on issues related, in particular, to men’s health and well-being, suicide, family violence and sexual abuse.

Professor Ernest Hunter talked of “communities at risk” and “high risk lifestyles” that lead to high rates of suicide in Aboriginal communities. He claimed that this problem emerged in these communities in the late 1980s among young men in particular.

Citing the work of Michael Chandler (2003), Hunter spoke of reduced suicide rates in indigenous communities where there is true community control in self-government, land claims, education, health, policing, and cultural facilities. Also, where there are more women in positions of power, there is reduced vulnerability in indigenous communities.



Keeping warm around the fire on day 3 at Williams Well

He encouraged us to assist “black cloud communities” to see and discover solutions.

Dr Rob Parker from Top End Mental Health and Sarah ORegan, NT Government Suicide Prevention Coordinator provided a picture of the NT and the magnitude of the problem we are hoping to address through a wide range

of strategies. I was struck by the complexity of the issue and the sad reality of the current statistics.

Dr Jo Robinson of ORYGEN Research Centre in Victoria informed us that many projects previously funded were poorly evaluated or did not report on the outcomes. There were some successes also.

Liz Archer of Waltja threw convention to the wind and presented a moving slide show of photographs depicting local Aboriginal people engaged in the activities that keep people strong, backed by the words and music of Patty Griffin. This was a powerful means of introducing the “We Know Our Strengths Project” to the audience.

Gerard Waterford and Christine Palmer of Congress’ Social and Emotional Wellbeing spoke of the link between suicide and meaningful and sustainable employment pathways for senior Aboriginal community members, improved fathering skills and culturally appropriate ways to address Aboriginal grief and loss.

I listened as information was shared about new projects from the Kimberleys, Nth Queensland and the Western Riverina district of NSW. Tools and resources that had been developed in other regions are worth knowing about

but the diversity among indigenous communities will drive the development of local resources that reflect local knowledge and local environment.

The workshops were held on the third and final day and, unfortunately, some were not well attended. I was pleased with the turn up to Life Promotion’s trial run of the suicide awareness training. It was well received as a more appropriate means to discuss the issue of suicide with Aboriginal people.

Cultural events

Cultural events were held over the three days. MK and Amelia Turner warmly welcomed us all to this country and to the Irrekelantje Learning Centre. A performance by Drum Atweme, a feed of kangaroo curry, a tour of the arts centre and a cultural talk by MK was a highlight for many in attendance.

The Oliver family hosted us for the afternoon on the final day at their home at William’s Well. A cold wind blew threw the camp as we huddled around fires clutching cups of tea. Others ventured onto the backs of Marcus’s camels that afternoon while some chose to stay for a 5-day camel trek to Santa Teresa.

There was a good feeling among those who had spent the last three days together. SPA did a terrific job organizing the event in record time, and DoHA proved to be open to the last minute suggestions from the committee and should be commended for their commitment to this issue. For some of the local Aboriginal men, there was not enough new knowledge. Their contribution to numerous discussions at various forums over many years was not reflected in this three day event.

Some suggestions ...

Hopefully, next time we meet on this issue:

- ◆ it can be hosted in a remote community and talk will happen around fires and under trees
- ◆ the data can be presented sensitively
- ◆ people who have developed programs that are working to alleviate the “climate of risk” from the drug and alcohol and family violence sectors, remote health, youth work, arts and media, and sport and recreation will all be invited to share their learnings and successes in remote communities
- ◆ there will be less of the ‘being talked at’
- ◆ more Aboriginal people in remote communities can share their stories and learnings. ✕



Chinese Territory Medicine

Chillout Sessions

Ear Acupuncture & Meditation

Acupuncture and Meditation both help to re-establish balance and harmony in the body and mind—in combination they can be deeply relaxing and calming.

In a small group we use five acupuncture points in each ear plus simple meditation techniques designed to help relieve stress, anxiety and depression. People tend to feel calm and focused, experience better sleep and generally feel more comfortable.

This treatment can also help with some chronic pain management and is safe to use with other therapies and medications.

Sessions are for one hour a week, in blocks of four weeks.

Time: Thursday 5.15pm

Place: 24 Chewings Street

Cost: \$80 for 4 weeks

For further information or to book a place contact Sharon Follett on 8953 8805

For more information contact Laurencia Grant on (08) 8950 4608