Learning from the Experts: combining Indigenous Knowledge with western health models to build cultural bridges and improve health services for Indigenous peoples

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This presentation crosses both STEM and Social Science Research categories and fits well under the conference categories:
3: Indigenous Research Methods Applied to Standard Inquiries
4: Indigenous Systems of Knowledge Dissemination

ABSTRACT

There is overwhelming evidence supporting Elders and community members as experts and equal partners in health services design and delivery. Similarly, there is much literature informing clinical practise about how to provide culturally competent health services for Indigenous peoples. Despite this, Western health organisations fail to deliver culturally shaped treatment and care for Indigenous populations or even services that are acceptable/accessible to Indigenous peoples. In Australia, many Aboriginal people avoid mainstream government services. The history of colonisation, overt racism and blatant injustices inflicted in the recent past, has built significant barriers to trust and engagement with mainstream health services.

A previous study interviewing Aboriginal patients and their service providers found little evidence of individual racist or discriminatory attitudes. Interviewees stated their desire to build strong, positive relationships and improve two way understanding. Aboriginal patients voiced their frustration at insufficient cultural competence of many healthcare professionals, and the lack of cultural safety within hospitals and mainstream services generally. Clinicians reported inadequate access to training and knowledge about Aboriginal cultural and family obligations that may help improve the building of positive therapeutic relationships and two-way understanding.

The knowledge gained from this research in working with Aboriginal patients, family members and Elders as cultural ‘experts’ was published in mainstream journals, one of which was co-authored by Aboriginal Elders and aimed at educating renal nurses. Beginning with a non-Indigenous nurse/researchers’ story, this paper introduced Indigenous co-authors, and provided their perspectives on what being an Elder means to them. It also described how combining Indigenous knowledge and western biomedical methods can reduce Aboriginal people’s fear and avoidance of mainstream health services, creating more culturally comfortable spaces for treatment and care. Inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing and communicating within western biomedical publications is an important step forward in building cultural bridges and improving the Aboriginal person’s healthcare journey.