

Let's Stick Together to Close the Gap

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Background

Aboriginal Australians are disproportionately impacted by blood-borne viruses (BBVs), and sexually transmissible infections (STIs) compared to non-indigenous Australians. It is estimated that 8-12% of all hepatitis C diagnoses are among Aboriginal people, despite only representing 3% of the total Australian population.¹

Furthermore, there are insufficient designated Aboriginal positions to address the burden across NSW local health districts (LHD), HIV and Related Programs units, Sexual Health and non-government organisations working in this sector.

A Hepatitis NSW initiative to improve our capacity, address this inequality in health status and Close the Gap in health outcomes for Aboriginal people, Hepatitis NSW, ACON, Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP), NSW Users and AIDS Association, HIV/AIDS Legal Centre and NSW Positive Life came together to form the *Close the Gap 414* Working Group in March 2018.

ACON, SWOP and Hepatitis NSW have worked together on eight occasions since formation of the Working Group. The Annual Aboriginal Rugby League Knockout is the largest national gathering of Aboriginal people, attracting over 22,000 spectators, representing an excellent opportunity to engage with hundreds of Aboriginal people from all over NSW to raise awareness of BBVs, STIs, promote harm reduction, reduce stigma and encourage screening and treatment.

Methods

To maximise our reach and impact at a time when the Aboriginal population in Dubbo peaked, Hepatitis NSW, ACON and SWOP conducted a health promotion program at Bila Muuji Aboriginal Corporation Health Services and participated in the Aboriginal Women's Health Forum before the Knockout weekend.

For the Bila Muuji event we partnered with Western NSW LHD and Dubbo Sexual Health to deliver health education and screening opportunities. Everyone who attended the event could have a yarn with Aboriginal staff, share a BBQ lunch, and find out more about viral hepatitis, HIV and STIs. Together we addressed the barriers associated with access to health care by providing screening for BBVs and STIs on the spot. Voucher incentives were offered to encourage testing and to return for results.

The first Aboriginal Women's Health Forum was held the following day. Remarkable Aboriginal women from the local area shared their personal stories highlighting the important role Aboriginal women play in fostering healthy communities. Hepatitis NSW Project Officer Kerry Walker and Rusty Nannup from SWOP were two of the Aboriginal women that delivered their story whilst educating the audience on hepatitis B, C and STI's.



ABOVE: Bila Muuji flyer

Results

The two health promotion and health education events prior to the Knockout enabled partner organisations to maximise our reach and impact, strengthening our relationships within the region.

At Bilu Muuji, 40 people attended the event and over 80 resource packs were distributed. A total of 14 people were screened for BBVs and STIs and offered the option of test results being followed up by the Aboriginal Health Practitioners, or their local health care provider.

Since 2018 we've reached and engaged with hundreds of Aboriginal people, including over 500 education interactions at the Knockout where hundreds of resources and condom packs were distributed.

Conclusion

Close The Gap 414 partner organisation's communities overlap, and by working together we provide holistic and integrated health promotion programs. Pooling our financial and staff resources allows for a coordinated approach and builds capacity for future work.

The camaraderie and shared commitment to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by *Close The Gap 414* Indigenous staff is integral to the program's success.



ABOVE: Kage Gold ACON Hunter, Kerry Walker HNSW, Rusty Nannup SWOP, Chantell Martin SWOP

1. Treloar C, Hopwood M, Cama E, Saunders V, Jackson, CL, Walker M, Ooi C, Ubrihien A, Ward J (2018). Evaluation of the Deadly Liver Mob program: insights for roll-out and scale-up of a pilot program to engage Aboriginal Australians in hepatitis C and sexual health education, screening, and care. *Harm Reduction Journal*; 15:5

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ABOVE: Community and Staff Kerry Walker & Sandy Davidson HNSW, Rusty Nannup & Annaliese Constable SWOP, Kage Gold & Jordon Wimbis ACON, Pamela Renata Bila Muuji