
‘Believe in me and I will believe in myself’, a rural Australian health service learns how to mangan dunguludja ngatan (build strong employment) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: a qualitative study

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1 Introduction

Australian Aboriginal people have higher rates of unemployment than non-Aboriginal Australians and poorer health. Historical segregation policies that spanned sixty years negatively impacted workforce inclusion. A Victorian regional health service recently developed an Aboriginal Employment Plan (AEP) targeted to reach 2% employment of Aboriginal people by 2020. This study aimed to identify the strategies that might achieve the goals of that plan.

2 Materials and Methods

A qualitative research protocol was designed. Purposive recruitment of people with a vested interest in the growth of Aboriginal employment at the health service participated in focus groups and individual interviews.

3 Results

Twenty-four people including local Elders, past and present Aboriginal employees, key community stakeholders and health service executives participated. Learnings from the past, the present and strategies for the future emerged from two important stories: 1. The story of a strong group of local Aboriginal people who successfully approached the matron of the hospital in the early 1960s for employment. 2. The story of the ‘Verandah Babies’ and how women, in the face of cultural inequity achieved employment at the very health service that had segregated them.

4 Conclusion

Cultural healing is more than the responsibility of an individual, rather a collective commitment from the organisation in partnership with the community at large. Reconciling the past through acknowledging historical events and continually adapting through cultural learnings, demonstrates leadership and an opportunity to teach future generations that healing is possible. Culturally safe environments promote both healing and employment opportunities for Aboriginal people. Continually advancing Aboriginal cultural inclusion may indeed *mangan dunguludja ngatan* (build strong employment).

Author biography



Cynthia A Opie Cynthia Opie (RN, Ba Public Health, Master's in Public Health and Tropical Medicine) has spent much of her career as a primary healthcare nurse in general practice; developing a particular affinity for chronic condition self-management, coaching people through lifestyle modification such as smoking cessation and weight loss. A background that led Cynthia to work in remote parts of Australia (East Arnhem Land) and volunteering in India before embarking upon a career in rural health research. Cynthia's research focus maintained a lens on obesity and priority populations including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and those experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that lead to poor health outcomes, including substance use disorder. Cynthia is now enjoying a career in Community Health leadership, as an Executive member at an outer regional health service.