

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND



There has been little overall progress in the health of the Indigenous populations of Australia despite some areas of improvement (Ring I and Brown N, 2002). The burden of health professional shortages, particularly Indigenous medical professionals, is felt most acutely in Indigenous communities, a constituency with profound economic, social and health disadvantage by comparison with the general Australian population (Armstrong R and Van Der Weyden M, 2005, Turrell G et al., 2004) and compared with Indigenous groups in comparable countries (Australian Medical Association, 2004a, Lavoie J, 2005). This has implications for the recruitment and retention of sufficient health professionals with the skills and attributes necessary to work effectively in the diverse socio-cultural environments of Indigenous communities. The positive relationship between the emotional, physical and cultural wellbeing of Indigenous people whose health care is provided by Indigenous medical and health professionals has been well documented (Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association, 2005 (Minniecon D & Kong K), Goold S et al., 2002).

As noted by the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association, Indigenous doctors account for 0.18% of the medical profession, despite 2.4% of the Australian population being Indigenous, while Indigenous medical students still only make up 1.1% of the medical student population (Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (Minniecon D & Kong K), 2005:17). The reasons for the consistently low level of recruitment and enrolment of Indigenous students into medicine remains only partially understood. On the one hand, the under-representation of Indigenous students in the higher education sector has its roots in history and the complex and multigenerational cycles of social and economic exclusion and disadvantage experienced in many Indigenous communities. On the other, discrepancies in the numbers of Indigenous students

studying in Australian medical schools indicate the lack of a uniform, national approach to the recruitment, retention and support of Indigenous medical students as well as problems with the implementation of programs and strategies. Further, continued under-representation of Indigenous students in medical careers underscores the need for medical schools to engage more purposefully with Indigenous high school students, their parents and communities and secondary schools (beginning in the early years), as well as the vocational education sector. The diversity of circumstances and experiences of Indigenous students, their families and communities needs to be acknowledged, and recognition must be given to supporting the multiple pathways into a professional health or medical career for aspiring Indigenous students.

Consortium

Barawul Yana, formed part of a larger collaboration between Monash University (Monash), James Cook University (JCU) and the University of New South Wales (UNSW). The consortium report is titled, *Footprints Forwards: better strategies for the recruitment, retention and support of Indigenous medical students*.¹

UNSW Component

The University of New South Wales identified the high school years as an important window of opportunity for encouraging and supporting the retention of students through to tertiary education, including the support required to encourage and maintain interest in a health related career and, subsequently promote entry to tertiary education. Initially it was anticipated that the early years of high school, years 7-10, would be the focus of this study. It soon became evident that the logistical and ethical processes required to make contact with this

1. Drysdale, M., Faulkner, S. and Chesters, J. (Eds.) 2006 *Footprints Forwards: better strategies for the recruitment, retention and support of Indigenous medical students*. Monash University School of Rural of Health, Moe

group of Indigenous students would fall outside the project's time frame. It was also realised that by examining the impact of residential health careers programs for high school students in Years 10 – 12, and by including narratives outlining the experiences of students through their schooling years and into university study, that many issues pertinent to the student experience in the earlier years of high school would be illuminated. Further, these issues would be discussed at length in our interviews with careers advisors, teachers and Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEA's), as well as other stakeholders involved in health careers promotion.

The Rural Clinical School (RCS), the Muru Marri Indigenous Health Unit (MMIHU) and the Nura Gili Indigenous Programs at UNSW (Nura Gili) investigated the opportunities for, and barriers to, Indigenous student entry into medical education. Based on these findings, a number of innovative strategies to increase Indigenous enrolment and provide sustainable support in Australian medical schools have been identified and recommended. A core component of this research was to examine the role of university-based health career residential programs in facilitating the entry of students to higher degrees in the health professions. *Barawul Yana* is the result of the NSW research, whose respondents were drawn from urban, regional and remote rural sites.

These included: Indigenous students from high school who identified an interest in pursuing a health-related career; graduates of the UNSW Winter School; applicants and graduates of the UNSW Pre-Medicine Program; currently enrolled Indigenous medical students at UNSW, and Health Professionals.

Staff of schools (principals, teachers, career advisors and Aboriginal Education Assistants) who sent students to the Koori Health Careers Residential Workshops in Wagga Wagga; Indigenous community, professional and academic stakeholders involved with the Koori Health Careers Residential Workshops.

UNSW Research Team

The UNSW research team comprised Indigenous and non-Indigenous people from a diversity of backgrounds who had worked with Indigenous people and communities in a variety of contexts

over many years. The team consisted of three chief investigators (CIs) and a research team, including administration and fieldwork support. Mr Dennis McDermott, initially involved in the original application, joined the writing team at the end of the Project and also provided an editorial and advisory role for the final report. Indigenous members of the team are highlighted in bold type in the list below.

Dr David Sutherland (CI)

David is former Head of the Rural Clinical School (Sydney Campus) and was the developer of the original proposal. He has contributed his oversight and perspectives throughout the project

Dr Lisa Jackson Pulver (CI)

Lisa is an Associate Professor and Director of the Muru Marri Indigenous Health Unit and participated in all aspects of the project, including the initial development of the research and methodological protocol, the analysis and writing of the report, leading the UNSW component of the Monash-led DVD-Rom and providing day to day leadership in managing the project.

Associate Professor Sue Green (CI)

Sue is Director of the Nura Gili Indigenous Programs at UNSW and has lent a valued perspective to this project. As well, Sue facilitated initial meetings with Indigenous medical students and with staff at Nura Gili.

Ms Rachelle Arkles

Rachelle was employed as the *Barawul Yana* Project Coordinator (UNSW component) and played an integral role in the day to day running of the project, the design of the methodology, the fieldwork for the project and writing of the project report, including the literature review. Rachelle was also involved in setting up the UNSW component of the Monash-led DVD-Rom.

Ms Jill Guthrie

Jill contributed to the methodological design and to writing the project report. She was involved in conducting interviews with applicants to the Winter School and Pre-Medicine Program, then with analysing and writing up those results. Jill conducted

some interviews for the case studies, school staff and other stakeholders, as well as contributing to the production of the final report.

Ms Sue Sutherland

Sue was responsible for coordinating and conducting the Wagga Wagga fieldwork component with the stakeholders, students, Indigenous health professionals and academics involved in the Koori Health Careers Residential Workshops. Sue brought a wealth of expertise to this project as the former joint Program Coordinator for the Wagga Wagga Koori Health Careers Residential Workshops.

Dr Phyll Dance

Phyll contributed to the methodological design and was involved in conducting interviews with applicants to the Winter School and Pre-Medicine Program, then with analysing and writing up those results. Phyll also conducted some interviews for the case studies and contributed to the production of the final report.

Ms Allison Dejanovic

Allison was employed as the project's administration and support officer. Her role in contacting students for the project was a major factor contributing to the highly successful response rate of graduates of the Winter School and Pre-Medicine Program interviewed for this study. Allison also provided valuable input on the demographic information for respondents.

Mr Dennis McDermott

During his time at the Muru Marri Indigenous Health Unit and at the Rural Clinical School (Sydney campus), Dennis participated in the development of the original proposal and early research planning. He subsequently rejoined the team as a writer and key contributor to this final report.

Aims and Objectives

The project aims were to:

Conduct a literature review focusing on publications that would illuminate the relationship between the complex needs of Indigenous secondary school students and the challenges for the University sector in ensuring their increased representation and success, particularly in relation to health professional careers;

Examine the impact of University-based Indigenous-specific health career residential programs for high school students;

Identify the enablers and barriers to increasing Indigenous recruitment and enrolment in medical and other health programs;

Make recommendations for implementation of strategies to increase access, retention and completion of Indigenous students into higher education health careers, including building on the residential health career promotion model;

Provide a voice for Indigenous students as well as other stakeholders to illuminate the challenges involved in striving towards careers in medicine and other health professions.

Key research questions

The following research questions underpinned the project:

What steps are required to facilitate the pathways for Indigenous students from secondary school into careers in medicine and health at University?

What are the experiences of Indigenous students with University-based residential health and medical careers programs, and what is the impact of these programs on students' career progression?

How can the systems set up for Indigenous students accommodate their cultural and family commitments?

Report Structure

Chapter One outlines the study and sets out its aims, objectives and key research questions. Chapter Two provides a literature review which contextualises the study. In Chapter Three we set out the methodology used and an overview of the fieldwork.

Chapters Four to Six report on the study's findings, and follow a chronological order in relation to respondents' progression from exposure to a range of medical and other health professional careers (through programs such as the Wagga Workshops and UNSW Winter School), through to attendance in a medical preparatory program (PMP), and enrolment in a higher degree in medicine or related health professional course, as set out in the narratives. Chapter Four examines the impact of the Wagga Wagga Koori Health Careers Residential Workshops

for Indigenous students through the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders including teachers, careers advisors and Aboriginal Education Assistants as well as local community, professional and academic stakeholders who participated in the Workshops.

Chapter Five reports on telephone interviews with graduates of the UNSW Winter School and the PMP. Chapter Six presents the stories of medical students at UNSW and other post-graduate health professionals.

In Chapter Seven, the project findings are discussed in relation to the key aims and research questions posed by the study, and recommendations for the future are put forward.

