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Aboriginal culture and health

'The land is my backbone...

I only stand straight, happy, proud and not ashamed of my colour because I still have land. I can paint, dance, create and sing as my ancestors did before me.

I think of land as the history of my nation. It tells me how we came into being and what system we must live by. My great ancestors, who live in the times of history, planned everything that we practice now. The law of history says that we must not take land, fight over land, steal land, give land and so on.

My land is mine only because I came in spirit from that land, and so did my ancestors of the same land.... My land is my foundation.'

**Recognition: The Way Forward,
Australian Catholic
Social Justice Council**

Land

When we reflect on indicators of health on our planet – global warming, wealth distribution, social unrest, war – very few would think of Dreamtime stories. But perhaps we are wise to recall that how we understand our place in the cosmos actually does have a material effect on the will to keep breathing, keep doing, and surviving. The land is fundamental for healthy individual, family, clan group, society, community and nation. The land governs Aboriginal law and life. And it is from connection to country that Aboriginal identity and belonging derive.¹

Photos of Aboriginal people who lived close to their land and traditions always show them to appear lithe and healthy.

Yet, kidney disease alone, amongst Centralian Aboriginal people, is between 30 to 50 times the national average.²

Where are the problems?

Most social and health problems exist in the towns rather than in remote outstations, so often the focus of negative media attention. Mortality and disease are seven times higher among Indigenous than non-Aboriginal Australians. Especially in places where there is little work, lack of activity for young people, pub and clubs open for long hours and a sedentary life style separate from the bush we find heart disease, diabetes, depression and alcoholism. Importantly, ceremonial practice and caring for country also become sporadic.

Experiments indicate that people living with diabetes become almost symptom free when they return to their old ways, to good diet and exercise. The question arises as to whether there has been a split between the causality of traditional living and health? What is being missed when much needed health care is separated from people's beliefs, customs, ceremonies and land?

Rethinking

As important that education services, health facilities, and other infrastructure are, so too is 'the spirit' or 'life force.' This is very important in any project to close the gap in life expectancy. So how can we respond to this? What's the answer? The answer begins by simply asking people, 'What do you need most?'



Possible solutions

The creative solutions to the health conundrums, the ones that actually work, are those that come from the people themselves. So let's listen. We could call it Narrative Therapy, call it human decency, call it what you like. But only when the listening really happens can the real healing begin. Not just the flesh and bone, but of the spirit.³

Cultural practices have been described as being like 'a vaccination against illness of the spirit and of the body'.⁵ Dhanggal Gurruwiwi points out that the notion that something as esoteric and spiritual as ceremony can have tangible health benefits needs to be embraced in the political mainstream. If this is so, then there needs to be some correlation of government policy and social provision for Aboriginal communities.

“As Indigenous Peoples,

we have a sacred responsibility that we understand through our creation stories, as caretakers of Mother Earth and caretakers of the sacred fires of our traditions, also have a responsibility to speak and advocate on behalf of those that cannot speak for themselves, and that is the four-legged, the winged ones, the ones that swim, the ones that crawl under the earth, and our plant relatives.”⁴

According to Tom Calma, of the more than half a million Indigenous people in Australia, 30% live in remote areas whereas the rest live in regional or urban areas. Without functional outstations, caring for country and practicing ceremony is extremely difficult. When the former coalition government handed over responsibility for Indigenous housing to the states in 2007, no federal funding was to be spent on outstation housing. It is a policy that has not yet been reversed. The Northern Territory intervention by the Howard Government shows how this is still not understood as it focused on practicalities such as health checks, nutrition, and reducing access to alcohol alone.

Studies have shown that less punitive measures can be far more effective: ‘Just being on country and living the sort of lifestyle that people are, going out hunting, going out foraging, having to work to just get the material, the wherewithal to sustain the ceremony is important, and it really gives people a purpose, whereas sitting round in the community unemployed for year after year doesn't really give people any sense of purpose.’⁶

Ceremony

According to Marett, ceremony is in many ways the law, the library, the bank, the place where the important things get transacted. These cover behaviour, the passing on of key elements of wisdom and learning, identity and belonging. In many cases unless a young man has undergone certain ceremonies, he is not allowed to marry. Younger people are controlled and guided through the economic and the social institutions of society. Where young men are not put through ceremony unruly and antisocial behaviour can follow.

Dean Yibarbuk, from the Wardekan land management program, and GP Paul Burgess would agree with this. They worked on the Healthy Country: Healthy People project from 2004-2007, studying the effects of ceremony and living on country (in the outstations) on Indigenous health. Yibarbuk says that in the areas he worked it was found that drawing more and more family groups from the community into the care for country project – hunting, camping, talking to spirituality, talking to the environment, they felt relaxed and healthy. On return to town, problems with depression, sadness, and other issues re-emerged. The major health indicators showed a marked reduction in diabetes and heart disease. 15 years of study and follow ups show that community which is almost entirely outstations have achieved reductions in cardiovascular deaths and admission to hospital by around 40% which is less than the expected percentage in the Northern Territory or across the nation.

Following checkups for people, preventative health checkups, and checking health outcomes compared to the participation against those range of activities (caring for country), it was found to have impressive health benefits. The major causes of premature death and illness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are diabetes,

heart disease, kidney failure, obesity. Against every one of those key indicators it was found that caring for country was associated with significant and substantial better health.

This story needs to be aired in the light of a political climate that saw closure of outstations because they were considered unviable and unsustainable. What is missed here is the health benefits to Aboriginal people and ecological benefits to the environment.

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Articles 11-13 focus on cultural, spiritual and linguistic identity. It provides for the protection of the rights of Indigenous peoples to care for country and culture. It also affirms and recognises the rights to maintain and strengthen relationship with lands, territories, waters and resources and ensure their viability for future generations, and is reinforced by the right to practice cultural traditions and customs including dances, songs and stories all of which also contribute to literature and all forms of art in the broader community.

‘Culture is the key to caring for country, and caring for country is the key to caring for our culture’ Tom Calma

‘Patients as meat’

Many non-Indigenous Australians fail to understand or acknowledge the importance of culture and relationship to country. For them land is a commodity that can be bought and sold. The best of modern medicine retreats from the ‘patients as meat’ approach by attempting to understand and treat people with the complexity of their environments, family, social and work settings. For Indigenous people, the land is ‘home’; it is ‘mother’; and steeped in culture. Care for country itself sustains their lives spiritually, physically, socially and culturally. It is something that must be recognised if we are to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health.

Full references on the ERC website.



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