

# *Developing Linkages between an Aboriginal Population and a Palliative Care Service*

## *Final Report*

*A project funded under the Caring Communities Program  
by the Australian Government Department of Health & Ageing*

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<b>Fund holder (auspice body):</b>	<b>Wentworth Area Health Service (WAHS)</b>
<b>Name of service conducting the project:</b>	<b>Palliative Services Stream of Chronic and Complex Care</b>

## **Executive Summary**

### **Background**

Low levels of access to specialist palliative care services by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population living within WAHS was identified as an issue during a strategic planning process undertaken in 2002. The purpose of this project was to improve access by developing sustainable linkages between the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and WAHS palliative care services.

### **Literature Review**

There is a large amount of historical and ethnographic material covering many aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. These include historical issues, government policies, socio-economic disadvantages and past and current health statistics. Journals, internet sites, government reports and articles were researched to gather a greater understanding of and depth of issues pertaining to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health in Australia.

### **Major Sequential Project Implementation Steps**

- Establish the project management structure including the projects advisory committee, local project leaders, the terms of reference and the roles and responsibilities of the participating partner.
- Recruit a project officer to assist in implementation of the project.
- Perform a needs analysis encompassing
  - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people perceptions about palliative care services
  - Area Health Service staff perceptions of providing palliative care services for Aboriginal patients
- Provide education and training and provide resources on issues facing indigenous people and on indigenous cultural awareness to service providers.
- Develop culturally appropriate information and promotion resources for communities.
- Develop partnerships between key stakeholders.
- Evaluate the processes and the overall impact on the use of palliative care services by Aboriginal communities and its perceived appropriateness.
- Document the project including the evaluation outcomes in final report to the Department of Health and Ageing.

### **Needs Analysis**

Focus groups and in depth interviews were conducted involving

- Aboriginal Carers
- Aboriginal Community Workers
- WAHS Health Staff

All persons taking part consented to participation in the research project and were provided with printed information sheets. In addition, the facilitators of the focus groups provided this information verbally. The WAHS Human Research and Ethics Committee approved all questionnaires.

## **Education**

An education program titled “Caring for the Aboriginal Palliative Care Client” was developed and included in the quarterly Sydney West Area Health Service (SWAHS) western cluster palliative care education modules. The palliative care service is developing education programs on palliative care in association with SWAHS Aboriginal Health for Aboriginal Liaison Officers. These programs will also be made available to Aboriginal Medical Service staff.

There has been ongoing sharing of information with local Aboriginal groups who have suggested a need for a “Help Kit.” This should include information on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal health services, other services from non-government organisations providing care to Aboriginal communities, medications used for patients receiving palliative care, death and dying, preparation of wills, arranging funerals, arrangements for returning to their land after death, negotiating Centrelink and other issues.

## **Results**

As a result of this project, there has been:

- An increase in access to palliative care services by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Implementation of a module ‘Palliative Care: Care of Aboriginal People’ into Palliative Care training – facilitated by an Aboriginal health care worker
- An increase in the knowledge and understanding of palliative care service providers on how to address Aboriginal issues in palliative care
- Increased use of existing information and resources supported by an expressed understanding of how and from where information and support can be obtained.
- Inclusion of cultural needs in care plans
- Continuing contact with local Aboriginal groups
- Request to participate in the NSW Aboriginal Carers Forum at Penrith and Katoomba 2005
- Request to present on Aboriginal Cultural Safety at Sacred Heart Education programmes 2005, 2006
- Request from palliative care peers for assistance in developing similar programs in Victoria.

## **Evaluation**

As the Aboriginal culture is a narrative culture, some more informal processes needed to be used and some parts of the project have been more difficult to evaluate. During the life of the project, the National Indigenous Palliative Care Kit was released. This proved to be a valuable tool especially when forging links with Aboriginal community groups.

The following evidenced based objectives were met by the project to date:

- Development and inclusion of an education module for Area Health staff working across the three modalities – aged care facilities, inpatient and community health services
- Continued building of rapport, partnerships and “friendships” with the local Aboriginal community as witnessed by the continuing requests for information from the local Elders Group
- Awareness of the importance surrounding utilisation of community based and **local community** focussed Aboriginal Liaison Officers when interacting with the Aboriginal community

Other major achievements of the project were:

- Increased awareness of Aboriginal cultural issues by WAHS health staff resulting in ‘personal growth’ for those directly involved in the project
- Increased knowledge of palliative care issues by Aboriginal community
- Increased referrals to community based palliative care services
- Aboriginal Elders groups requesting education that has built beginnings of rapport and “friendships.”

The major factors behind this success in meeting project objectives included:

- Funding
- Resources
- Committed staff

all of which need to be sustained in order to maintain and address these outcomes in the present and future.

Useful lessons included:

- The project revealed incongruence between Anglo-Australian approaches to palliative care and Aboriginal people’s aspiration for self-determination, their ways of communicating, and their social organisation associated with caring for their sick.
- The identification of a need to advance the cultural awareness of health care providers by enhancing their knowledge of Aboriginal history and culture.
- The Aboriginal Liaison Officer must be known to and accepted by the local Aboriginal community and their organisations

A strong message of prejudice and lack of awareness was noted from the Aboriginal community, non-Aboriginal participants and health care workers. Racism was also evident from some of the non-Aboriginal health care workers. Thus, there was a need to promote reconciliation, growth and learning amongst both groups.

One of the most important messages was a request from the Aboriginal Elders to have ownership of the results of the project. This empowered the group and provided them with a voice supporting the changes required for their own community.