



Indigenous Australia

There is an alarming disparity between the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians and other Australians.

The life expectancy of Indigenous Australians is 17 years less than that of all Australians. In some parts of the country, between 65 and 75 percent of Indigenous people die before the age of 65. (A, 156) The mortality rate of Australia's Indigenous infants is comparable to those of some developing countries.

Indigenous Australians have fewer opportunities to maintain and improve their health and life situation than non-Indigenous Australians. (D) They do not have the same access to employment, housing, medical services and education, nor are they equally engaged in our social and political systems.

Those who live in remote and isolated areas suffer the greatest disadvantage.

While there have been some improvements to Indigenous health over recent years, the disparity remains. (A) It needn't be this way and it has to change.

The Fred Hollows Foundation works to improve the health and wellbeing of Indigenous people in some of the most remote communities in Australia.

Our Indigenous Program operates as a series of interrelated projects that address the underlying causes of health inequity. These projects include nutrition, literacy, eye health, aural health, women's health, workforce training and community engagement.

A picture of health inequity

- The life expectancy of Indigenous Australians is 59 years for males and 65 years for females. This compares to 77 years for other Australian males and 82 years for all females. (A)
- Up to 75% of Indigenous males die before the age of 65, compared to just 26% of non-Indigenous males. (A)
- Between 1999 and 2003, the mortality rate of Indigenous infants was three times the rate of non-Indigenous infants. (A)
- Indigenous people suffer high rates of nutrition and diet related chronic disease. Indigenous Australians aged 35-54 years are between 23 to 37 times more likely to die from type 2 diabetes than non-Indigenous Australians in the same age group. (A)
- More than a third of Indigenous homes in the Northern Territory are over-crowded, putting people at greater risk of infectious diseases and other physical and mental health problems. (A)
- In some remote Indigenous communities and schools, up to 60% of children suffer from trachoma, an infectious eye disease that causes blindness if left untreated. (C)

This information sheet describes the approaches used in The Foundation's Indigenous Program and highlights some of our joint projects with local Indigenous partners.

The Foundation's Indigenous Program

Professor Fred Hollows was passionate about improving health and life expectancy for Australia's Indigenous people.

When Fred first visited rural Indigenous communities in the 1960s he was shocked by the deplorable living conditions. He was disturbed by the great number of children and adults suffering from blinding trachoma, a disease that had been largely eradicated in the rest of Australia.

Fred quickly took action and pioneered the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program. The program travelled through rural Australia offering eye care and treatment for locals who would otherwise be out of reach of the public health system.

In 1992, Fred and his wife Gabi launched The Fred Hollows Foundation to expand and continue his passionate work.

Over the past 15 years, The Foundation has taken a comprehensive approach to improving the health and life opportunities of Indigenous people.

Our work is largely focused on the Northern Territory where nearly one-third of the population is Indigenous and most live in remote communities. (G) More recently we have expanded to include remote areas of western New South Wales and are negotiating program development in other states.

These communities are far from health and education services, have fewer employment opportunities and because the cost of living can be so high it is impossible for people on low incomes to afford a nutritious diet.



Photo | Fred Hollows (second left) and the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program team in outback Australia in the 1970s. Photo courtesy of The Fred Hollows Foundation.

A partnership approach

The Foundation expanded its approach to Indigenous Health in the late 1990s.

The Jawoyn Association (traditional landowners of the Jawoyn region east of Katherine, Northern Territory) approached The Foundation to assist them in improving nutrition and health for their people.

This invitation allowed The Foundation to fulfil more of Fred's dream and tackle the broader health issues affecting Indigenous people in an appropriate and meaningful way.

In 2000, a formal agreement was made with the Jawoyn Association, Sunrise Health Service Aboriginal Corporation and other local Indigenous organisations. We have worked in cooperative and successful partnership ever since.

The following paragraphs describe the programs currently supported and promoted by The Foundation. The objectives and processes of each program reflect the needs and priorities identified by the local communities.

The Foundation's role is to exchange and share our expertise and practical support with our Indigenous partners. Using a partnership approach we aim to empower the communities to realise their own successes.

Social Determinants of Indigenous Health

The causes of the health inequity suffered by Indigenous Australians are not straight-forward, but neither are they insurmountable.

'Social determinants of health' is a term used throughout the world to describe an interrelated set of factors that influence each person's quality of life and health. In Australia, these factors include: shelter, employment, education, access to healthy food, access to health care, race and social status, cultural engagement, gender, environment including housing and stress.

Addressing social determinants of health is central to The Foundation's Indigenous Program. We work with our Indigenous partners to identify which determinants are most affecting Indigenous people in their region(s).

We use the following principles to guide our Indigenous Program:

- Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for their health and wellbeing.
- Improvement in health requires a secure foundation in the basic prerequisites of peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable ecosystem, sustainable resources, social justice and equity.
- We work in partnership with Indigenous organisations, individuals and communities to build a better understanding of the determinants of health to enable our partners to develop strategies and initiatives to meet their own needs.
- We work with people who want to liberate themselves from the social, political and economic constraints that marginalise them.

Nutrition

It is well accepted that nutrition is central to good health and wellbeing. Poor nutrition has been linked to higher incidence of disease, chronic health conditions and stunted growth of children.

The inequity suffered by Australia's Indigenous population living in remote areas is stark. Access to fresh foods is severely limited by isolation, transport difficulties (especially during the wet season), inadequate food storage facilities and limited retail options. The price of fresh fruit is up to **88%** higher than in cities like Darwin.

Together with our community partners, The Foundation is aiming for long-term sustainable improvements to nutrition in Indigenous communities. Our focus is on providing secure access to affordable, healthy food and on teaching families about the importance of food choice and preparation.

Our initial step was to rejuvenate and restock the **community stores**, the only place to buy groceries within remote communities. Ownership of the stores has been returned to the community and the staff has completed training in store management and stock handling. New fridges were provided along with other refurbishments so that fresh, nutritious food can now be properly stored and promoted. We also work with smaller communities to establish sustainable food supply.



Photo | Community stores supported by The Foundation now stock fresh food to improve nutrition within Indigenous communities. Photo courtesy of Claude Ho.

In addition to the stores, a **Horticulture and Land Care Project** has recently been launched. The project includes planting market gardens and orchards so that the community can harvest its own fresh produce.

The Foundation works to help families learn about nutrition and food preparation. The Foundation has also funded **dieticians and nurses** to work within the communities.

The **local women's centres** have been central in the push for better nutrition. They have invested time in educating women about diet and food preparation. In one community, the women have been involved in preparing healthy breakfasts each morning for all school children.

Other women have developed a healthy food cookbook to give to local community members and encourage better nutrition at home.

Many projects look to the longer term. In collaboration with Charles Darwin University, the Foundation is helping to send local people to the **Outback Chef** cooking course where they learn to combine bush tucker and store-bought foods to make nutritious and delicious meals.

A recent partnership with four local Aboriginal medical services and the NT Government is looking to prevent childhood anaemia, a condition associated with reduced immunity and slowed development in children. Past surveys in rural NT have shown that up to half of Indigenous children were anemic. (E)

The Foundation is helping to develop a research project to assess the suitability of powdered **multivitamin and iron supplements** for young children aged 6 months to 2 years.



Photo | Steve Sunk, Master Chef and lecturer at NT University, shows Barunga community members how to cook basic meals with traditional ingredients. Photo courtesy of Claude Ho.



Photo | Barunga community members learn how to prepare kangaroo steaks during an Outback Chef cooking course. Photo courtesy of Claude Ho.



Photo | Lunch is served! A participant of the Outback Chef cooking course serves up her creation for a taste test. Photo courtesy of Claude Ho.

Literacy

There is an enormous gap in the English literacy rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia.

The gap is even wider for Indigenous people living in remote and isolated communities. Benchmark testing in schools has found that by Year 7, less than one in five children living in very remote Indigenous communities in the NT can read at the accepted minimum standard.^(F)

Low literacy levels are a common and critical barrier to Indigenous people participating in education, employment and civic life – opportunities that most Australians take for granted. The Foundation and its partners are working to alleviate this literacy disadvantage.

The Foundation uses a **three-way approach** to building literacy. Each of our projects aims to promote:

Cultural Literacy: connecting people, particularly young people, to their culture and traditional language,

Practical literacy: developing the skills needed for daily activities,

English literacy: promoting skills in English reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Our programs aimed at improving nutrition, aural health and eye health have boosted the well-being of local children and young people. With their health improved, children are more able to attend school and to fully engage in learning.

We have also introduced a variety of programs that directly target literacy education. Several programs provide free books and other culturally appropriate learning materials to community schools and young people.



Photo | A school student from Bulman undertakes a writing exercise. Photo courtesy of Claude Ho.

Other programs include activities that engage young people in reading, music and traditional yarns. These programs aim to build reading and writing skills while embracing and valuing local Aboriginal culture and languages.

Eye Health

The eye health situation of Australia's Indigenous people living in remote areas is more comparable to that of some developing countries than to the rest of Australia.

The presence of untreated cataract, trachoma and other preventable eye diseases is evidence of the poverty and isolation in which many Indigenous Australians live.

The Fred Hollows Foundation is working with local Aboriginal health services and the Northern Territory Government to find affordable and sustainable ways to provide eye health services throughout remote areas of the Northern Territory.

One solution is the Foundation's **Outreach Optometry Project** in the Top End of the Northern Territory. This project provides access to optometry services for people in remote Aboriginal communities, including the supply of low cost spectacles.

On a larger scale, we have recently formed new partnerships to launch the **Integrated Eye Health Strategy for Central Australia**. This program aims to address the backlog of people in remote communities who need surgery for cataract, trachoma and other eye health problems.



Photo | Registrar Dr John Chang checks the vision of Brian Tjapaltjarri at Haasts Bluff, located four hours drive northwest of Alice Springs, Central Australia. Photo courtesy of The Fred Hollows Foundation.

Integrated and sustainable eye health care for Central Australia.

The Fred Hollows Foundation is working in partnership with local Aboriginal health services and the Northern Territory Government to develop a centre of eye health excellence in Central Australia.

Based at Alice Springs Hospital the program aims to develop facilities and procedures to ensure that remote Australians can access quality eye health services.

The initial focus is on reducing the backlog of people needing immediate surgery to restore their sight. In 2007, around 150 people were treated during "surgery blitzes", where patients were brought in to the clinic from several remote communities as well as from Alice Springs and Tennant Creek.

The program's reach takes in 1.6 million square kilometres of Central Australia – making it, geographically, one of the largest integrated eye health programs in the world. This area includes the top of South Australia, three quarters of The Northern Territory and much of the Central Desert of Western Australia.

Aural Health

Poor aural health can limit a child's language skills and restrict their participation in school and social life. Chronic Suppurative Otitis Media, a serious middle ear infection that causes permanent hearing loss, affects up to 40% of young children in some communities east of Katherine.

The Foundation has supported the Sunrise Health Service Aboriginal Corporation to include aural health care amongst its services.

Other Health Related Projects

The Foundation supports a number of smaller health related projects in Indigenous communities.

In the Jawoyn region, east of Katherine, NT, a **School Holiday Project** provides school children and their families with healthy holiday activities based around nutrition and sport.

The **Happy Healthy Homes Project** works in collaboration with an Indigenous regional council to provide households with support and guidance to ensure that they have clean and suitable amenities for safe and healthy living.

In western New South Wales, The Foundation is working with a local Aboriginal Medical Service on the **Bush Gatherings Project**. The project aims to support Indigenous people to access traditional country and give them access to health and other support services while they spend time on land.

Women's Health and Development

The Fred Hollows Foundation works closely with locally run Women's Centres to expand their services and help them become focal points for programs for women and their families.

A new maternal and child health project began in partnership with the Katherine West Health Board in 2007.

The Foundation is also supporting the development of a regional multi-purpose centre near Katherine.

Banatjarl Family Centre has been established to play a pivotal role in promoting women's development and health.

The centre will include a:

- refuge for victims of domestic violence
- training centre for women's nutrition and health programs
- knowledge centre to facilitate the handing down of traditional knowledge to younger generations
- learning centre to increase the participation of Jawoyn women in civic and political processes
- meeting place for women and families

Women's Centres Information Technology Training

Community-based Women's Centres are pivotal to maintaining and improving women's health and wellbeing in remote areas. The Centres act as a voice for women within the community.

The women who run them need broad skills to manage the centres and deal with the range of health and social issues faced by those seeking their services.

One practical way that The Foundation supports the Women's Centres is by funding training in business studies and computer skills.

The women see this training as a long-term answer to managing their own business and securing women's self-determination.

Training

One important aspect of our partnerships is the transfer of skills through training and participation.

Each of the Foundation's nutrition, literacy, health or development projects aim to develop the skills of local people and promote their right to self-determination.

In addition to these projects, The Foundation also supports specific training programs for local community members, such as the Diplomacy Training Program for those in management positions.

Other projects target youth and young people such as a Youth Leadership project and Indigenous traineeships within The Foundation's office located in Katherine.

Community engagement

The Fred Hollows Foundation employs local staff in Katherine, Alice Springs, remote towns in the Northern Territory and in Wilcannia in Western NSW. Our people work side-by-side with our Indigenous partners, spending much of their time visiting communities and listening to locals.

In addition to our nutrition, literacy and health activities we also support local Indigenous festivals, sports days, concerts and cultural celebrations. These events are important for cementing community relationships and promoting social wellbeing.

The Foundation also supports the people who run these events by providing practical training in areas such as events management.



Photo | Children enjoy a community day. Photo courtesy of Claude Ho.

References

- (A) *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, (ABS cat no. 4704.0) (Chapters 4 Housing, 9 Mortality), Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, April 2008, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/10583>
- (B) *Conductive Hearing Loss and Aboriginal Students*, Department of Education and Training Western Australia (DET WA), 2006, www.det.wa.edu.au/education/abled/apac/resources/pdf/conductive%20hearing%20loss.pdf
- (C) *Guidelines for the public health management of trachoma in Australia*, Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, 2006
- (D) *Social Justice Report 2005, The Indigenous Health Challenge*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2005, http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/sjreport05/sjr_2005_healthchallenge.html
- (E) *From Infancy to Young Adulthood, Health Status in the Northern Territory* D'Espaignet, Kennedy et.al, NT Department of Health and Community Services, 1998, pages 17-18 http://www.nt.gov.au/health/health_gains/epidemiology/infancy_adulthood_1998.pdf
- (F) *Indigenous Education Strategic Plan*, Department of Employment Education and Training, Northern Territory Government, 2006, page 5
- (G) *Indigenous Education*, Department of Employment Education and Training Northern Territory Government http://www.deet.nt.gov.au/education/indigenous_education/