

Title

Aboriginal Community Researchers: crucial to hearing Aboriginal people's voices and improving a trachoma elimination program

Authors

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Relevance

Australia is the only developed nation to still have endemic trachoma, which occurs in some remote Indigenous communities. Australia is committed to eliminate blinding trachoma by the year 2020 using the WHO-supported, international approach to eliminate trachoma: the SAFE strategy (Surgery for trichiasis; Antibiotic treatment; Facial cleanliness; Environmental improvements). Despite falling prevalence rates the sustained elimination of trachoma depends on the F and E components. The Trachoma Health Promotion Program (THPP) aims to prevent a 'bounce back' in trachoma once antibiotic treatment ceases.

Aims

An evaluation was undertaken to assess the understanding of, and response to, facial cleanliness messages in Aboriginal communities in the tri-State border region of NT (4), WA (1) and SA (1). The goal was to build on insights and effectiveness of the messages of the THPP for greater impact.

Methods

A qualitative evaluation used participatory action research and a reflection process to improve future participation of Indigenous communities in the THPP. Aboriginal Community Researchers (ACRs) participated in a co-design workshop with Indigenous Eye Health to identify key areas for evaluation with culturally appropriate questions and field methods. Then they conducted interviews and focus groups in the six remote communities. The ACRs notes and observations from interviews and group discussions were recorded for thematic analysis. Consent was gained to carry out this work. Ethics approval was obtained from the Central Australian Human Research Ethics Committee.

Results

Over 180 interviews and ten focus groups were conducted in Arrrente, Pitjantjatjara or English languages in six remote communities. The process of participation and reflection produced valuable findings including a stronger than expected engagement in the evaluation and good recognition of the program mascot Milpa; 86% understood what Milpa was 'saying' and 75% knew he represented good hygiene/clean faces and strong eyes. Surprisingly, equal effectiveness was found with paper resources, broadcast media and community visits. Suggestions for improvement included a stronger, more effective role for Milpa with children and families and using local languages.

Conclusion

Aboriginal Community Researchers were crucial to the engagement, participation, translation and support of community members in a participatory and reflective evaluation. This resulted in increased community knowledge and understanding of the THPP and a fruitful and practical evaluation to enhance the THPP in the complex environments of remote Aboriginal communities.