

Listening to and Learning from Each Other

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Small steps towards a better future. Sports Massage. An opportunity for addressing pain, disability and other major causes of morbidity and mortality in the Aboriginal community.

“You white people keep telling us Aboriginals that we have ear problems. You keep showing us the graphs and the research. You know, I think you mob are the ones with ear problems... we keep saying the same things and you don't seem to hear.”

The sports massage course conducted in Kempsey by Aboriginal health workers, chiropractors and massage practitioners was the end result of a lot of talking and even more listening. It was seeded and inspired by Uncle Paul Gordon' cultural elder of the Brewarrina Community in remote New South Wales.

The concern shared by Paul and other Elders of the Community was the epidemic of physical, mental and spiritual illness and helplessness that was consuming community members.

“The needs are striking. They're more like what you would see in a Third World country rather than what you would expect in rural and remote Australia. This is the legacy of a people disconnected from the past and poorly connected with the present”, said Paul in 1998.



**Aboriginal Health Workers
perform sports massage
on younger members of the
Kempsey Community**



From ancient times up to 50,000 Aboriginal people from the tribes of the surrounding areas would regularly come together by the banks of the Barwon River at Brewarrina, where ancient fish traps dating back over 30,000 years are still in evidence today. The local Aborigines would herd fish downstream into corrals that they had laid within the river system. The fish provided an abundant food supply to visiting tribes. By night the people would gather around the campfires, dance their corroborees and celebrate the gift of life and the earth.

At the end of the 19th century Queen Victoria ordered the creation of missions to protect Aboriginal people from being shot by early settlers. Aboriginal people were rounded up from nearby communities.

From these original benevolent intentions the efforts to ‘civilise’ Aboriginal people soon saw them prevented from hunting, gathering and eating their nutritious bush foods. They were forced to live on the mission and survive on rations of sugar, tea, coffee and refined flour. This diet and its legacy of poor health continues to affect Aboriginal people today.

They were forbidden to speak their own languages, practice their spiritual beliefs or hunt and gather traditional foods. Their chief forms of occupation changed to shearing, droving, fencing and cotton picking for white farmers. The work was low paid or even unpaid; it has been described as a type of ‘legitimised slave labour’.

Brewarrina was the biggest Australian Aboriginal mission in its day until it was closed in the late 1960s and, by then, very few people lived a traditional lifestyle or spoke their traditional language.

Today life for many young Aboriginal people is scarred by the despair of knowing that they have lost their culture, their land and their hope. The traditional lifestyle of hunting and fishing is not possible without the land.

The land is seen as their mother, the source of all life, and is central to their culture. In Paul’s words, seeing the land bulldozed for farming or dug up for mining is like a non-Aboriginal person returning home to find his own mother lying on the floor, bleeding. The feeling of hurt and of horror is the same in both cases.

The road to a more hopeful and healthy future for Indigenous Australians is clearly long and hard. A common message in Aboriginal spirituality is the importance of listening to and learning from each other – no matter where we come from; no matter what our beliefs are. We must “share the gifts of creation more fairly, to nurture each other and the land which, like an umbilical cord, sustains us”.

Uncle Paul often talks about the treasure of unity in community. He believes that, black or white, if we are prepared to acknowledge each other’s gifts and to work with people of like-mind and, more importantly, like-heart, we can truly begin to bring hope and healing into the world.

WHY SPORTS MASSAGE?

Uncle Paul’s maternal grandmother used prayers, bush medicines and massage to heal those who were suffering yet, on the mission where Paul was brought up, these things were forbidden. His people were sadly cut off by mission managers who were sometimes caring but usually exploitative in their dealings with Aboriginal people.

In the distant memory of the few cultural elders that remain in the community lies the tradition of using hands to heal. Uncle Neville, Cultural Elder and bush tucker man of the Thunghutti and Gumbangirr people (from the mid-north coast of New South Wales) recalls his father warming his hands at the fire before gently placing them on his temple and forehead and pressing on different points to ease his headaches.

During an intensive two-week period at the Kempsey course Tuesday Browell, Principal of the Murray School of Massage Therapy, Kempsey massage practitioner Pamela McKirdy and chiropractor Dr John and Carole Duggan, from New Zealand, worked together to train 21 Aboriginal health workers in the sphere of sports massage.



A massage workshop run for high school students at Brewarrina, NSW

It was a very practical, hands-on course that included traditional Indigenous approaches to care. Health workers were given credit for prior learning in first aid, occupational health and safety, anatomy and physiology subjects.

WHY TRAIN ABORIGINAL HEALTH WORKERS?

For a long time Aborigines have been saying there is an urgent need to deliver sustainable and culturally sensitive health care in order to respond effectively to the appalling health endured by their people. Aboriginal health workers have an intimate understanding of their people's needs. They also have the trust of and regular contact with their community, so necessary in promoting the health of their people.

The International Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries recently suggested that "Indigenous health services should ideally be planned and administered in cooperation with the peoples concerned and take account of their economic, geographic, social and cultural conditions as well as their traditional preventive care, healing practices and medicines".

The Convention concluded that "The health care system shall give preference to the training and employment of local community health workers and focus on primary health care while maintaining strong links with other levels of health care services".

AUTONOMY AND SELF-REGULATION

The message conveyed by many Aboriginal elders is not only the need for collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people but also a measure of independence in shaping the future of their communities.

They also recognise the importance of developing a professionally and culturally competent Indigenous health workforce.

"Health to Aboriginal peoples is a matter of determining all aspects of their life, including control over their physical environment, of dignity, of community self-esteem and of justice. It is not merely a provision of doctors, hospitals, medicines or the absence of disease and incapacity... life is health is life."

SPORTS MASSAGE IN THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

1. The Kempsey community.

The Durri community of Kempsey, NSW, comprises one of Australia's largest rural Aboriginal communities. Ongoing discussions with Aboriginal health workers and elders of the community highlights the importance of first gaining the trust of the community before addressing the deeper problems of pain and disability amongst Aboriginal people.

Sport has always been important to this community. Through sport people of all ages and backgrounds meet regularly, on common ground, to enjoy activities that promote their health in a broader sense.

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Health workers discuss the preparation of bush oils

The widespread appeal of sports massage in Kempsey presented a valuable opportunity for addressing not only musculoskeletal conditions but also some of the major risk factors associated with mortality and morbidity in this and other Aboriginal communities. These risk factors include:

- high levels of obesity
- lack of regular exercise
- and significant levels of physical trauma and injury

So beyond the potential to help with the pain and disability of musculoskeletal conditions, addressing obesity and lack of physical activity through health education will

also assist Aboriginal health workers to manage the dietary and lifestyle factors associated with cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

The sports massage course was supported by the Chiropractors' Association of Australia (CAA) National, Hands on Health Australia (HOHA)*, The Murray School of Health Education, Health Schools Australia and Booroongen Djugun Aboriginal College. It has been accredited nationally and will allow graduating Aboriginal health workers to practise in a range of community settings including Aboriginal health services, sporting clubs, voluntary community health clinics and private practice.



Aboriginal health workers practise their sports massage skills

Already health workers have integrated massage knowledge and skills in their daily work:

- Jack Griffen, Aboriginal cardiovascular health worker, now uses massage to help his stroke patients cope with the pain and disability associated with soft tissue contractures
- those working in Mental Health are using relaxation massage to help combat the many stresses that their patients endure and that their colleagues encounter in their demanding roles
- and some maternal health workers are using their skills in providing infant massage.

Massage practitioner Pamela McKirdy, chiropractor Dr Greg Taylor and chiropractor/osteopath Dr Barbara McCormack hope to continue the work of training health workers to treat the community as a way of providing sustainable health-care. They may be joined in the future by other practitioners from the district.

Massage practitioners and chiropractors were involved in both the development and implementation phases of

the course but, ultimately, the ownership of the Kempsey program will rest with the Aboriginal community.

Through its on-site and distance learning approaches to learning, Kempsey's Booroongen Djugun College is responsible for training Aboriginal health workers and nurses throughout rural and remote Australia. It is nationally recognised as one of Australia's finest training facilities for Aboriginal health workers.

As part of the sports massage course for health workers, Uncle Neville Buchanan and Tuesday Browell teach a subject that touches on Indigenous approaches to treating common injuries. This includes identifying, collecting and then preparing bush plant extracts as oils in the treatment of the more basic musculoskeletal conditions.

During our February trip, as we walked along the banks of the Nambucca River, Uncle Neville showed us a rich variety of herbs, fruits, leaves and grubs that have been used as medicines in the treatment of a whole range of conditions for thousands of years.

It is hoped that the understanding and documentation of regional bush tucker and bush medicines will not only help preserve Indigenous healing practices but also lift our appreciation of the accumulated wisdom inherent in this most ancient of cultures.

Uncle Neville constantly reminds us that The Creator gave us two ears and one mouth so that we could listen twice and speak once. When he takes children on his bush-tucker tours he tells them to first pull the cotton wool out of their ears and to put it in their mouths so that they can be still enough to take in the beauty of creation.

Elder Puggy Hunter strongly believed that "caring for each other begins by listening to each other".

2. The Cape York massage therapy training program

Tuesday Browell, Principal of the Murray School of Health Education (MSHE) has collaboratively established a Certificate IV in Myotherapy for Indigenous Communities. The project has the widespread support of the Hopevale Community. This course is designed for remote and rural learning; it brings the classroom to the community. Participants learn how to run a complementary and allied health clinic by working in a practice setting early in the course. The course is fully accredited and incorporates components of the Health Training Package and Sports Training Packages delivered within a culturally sensitive framework.

We hope that local practitioners will not only assist the initiative as it evolves in terms of supervising students but will, themselves, volunteer some time in the Hopevale Community.

As hands-on therapists many of us have a passion for helping – in particular for using our hands to help others and to bring about healing. Doing and nurturing comes easily but, at times, it may be just as valuable to step back and learn from the wisdom of those who have traditionally lived in harmony with all of creation for thousands of years. To be still and to see things from a different perspective is an important part of working within a different cultural setting.



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Health workers practise on the 'nippers' at surf rescue carnival

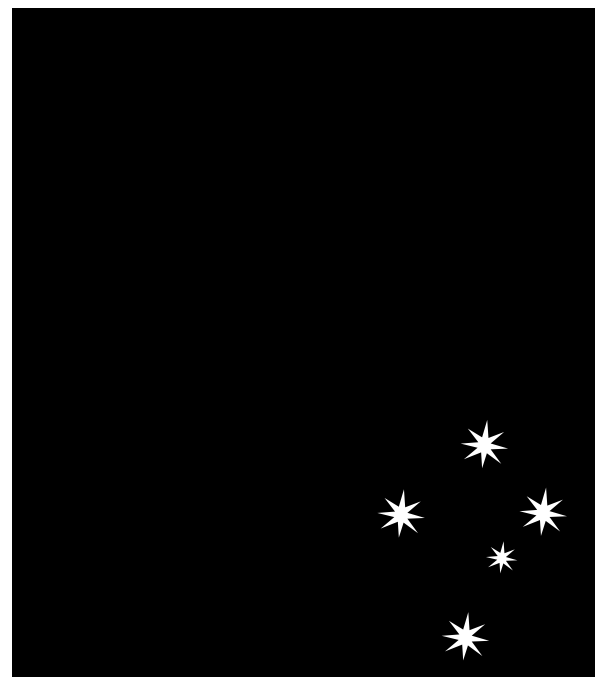
Kakkib li`Dthia Warrawee`a is an Indigenous elder, philosopher and naturopath. He believes that the “greatest insult that one can possibly express in his language and community is to say that someone is *dtoong; karla*; unable to see things in perspective and from different points of view”.

CONCLUSION:

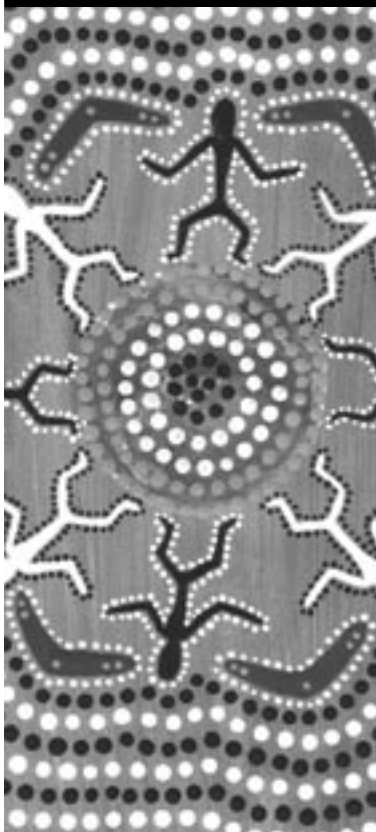
After years working in Aboriginal communities it has become increasingly apparent to many that the way forward is for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to listen and to learn from each other in shaping a more hopeful future.

NOTE: In the next issue of our magazine, Dein Vindigni will contribute a second article on the subject of Massage and the Australian Aborigine. He will take us through his thesis on this fascinating subject and share with us how he was inspired to research this particular topic by the work of Dr Felicity Redpath, a chiropractor and clinical educator who worked in Filipino squatter communities and among indigenous Filipinos from the rural provinces of the Philippines.

*Hands On Health Australia (HOHA) is a registered charity that provides voluntary health services and clinical training for health workers where health care is not readily accessible. It was established in 1988 to empower communities that are socially and financially disadvantaged. Clinics have been established in Australia and New Zealand, and are currently being developed in the Asia Pacific region. HOHA provided the volunteers and resources to conduct much of the work of Dein Vindigni’s thesis.



How You Can Help



Indigenous communities in Hopevale, Cape York, currently face extreme social and economic difficulties and the economic and health disparities continue to be worse than any comparable country in the world.

The unemployment, life expectancy and education rates are very low compared to non-Indigenous Australians. After a history of recurrent abuse over the past 200 years there is a pressing priority to develop an environment and economy in which employment, training and an improved quality of life evolve together with a reverence for the environment. Engaging with Indigenous people, and coping with our feelings of impotence, frustration and fear as health professionals, must play a role in the healing process.

The estimated cost of training Aboriginal health workers in the Cert IV Sports massage course for Indigenous communities is estimated at \$2000 per student. This will provide each student with educational materials, texts, insurance and running costs (food, travel accommodation for volunteers). Seven health workers are provisionally enrolled in the program.



If your school or interest group is willing to sponsor a Sports massage student, you can send a tax-deductible donation to:

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