



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Male Health Module for Aboriginal Health Workers

Unit 12. The role of traditional medicine

Content from:

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For the purposes of this guide, the term Aboriginal Health Worker (AHW) is used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health professionals that provide clinical and primary health care for individuals, families, and community groups. It is recognised that there are different registration requirements for the AHW workforce in different States and jurisdictions.

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Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medicine is a complex combination of spiritual and natural remedies contained within a culture and beliefs system created through an intimate understanding of the total environment (Isaacs, 2002). Traditional healing practices seek to provide a useful explanation of the illness in order to respond to the personal, family and community issues surrounding illness. They try to explain “why” a sickness occurred as well as “how” sickness occurred. This differs from contemporary (modern) Australian medicine, which focuses on the recognition and treatment of disease in a “how to fix it” approach.

Knowledge about bush medicine and traditional healing has been passed on from generation to generation and expanded upon for well over 40,000 years. However, much of the knowledge has been lost since European settlement and this is likely to continue. Some of the factors that caused this include (Trudgen, 2000):

- ❖ introduced diseases;
- ❖ banning of Aboriginal culture, language and practices;
- ❖ dispossession and removal from traditional lands;
- ❖ forced integration with other clans or skin groups;
- ❖ separation of “kin” (family) and “skin” (community) members; and
- ❖ the destruction of many of the plants and animals, together with the mining and removal of many minerals used in traditional healing practices.

Although some knowledge has been lost, the role of traditional medicine and bush healing is still very strong and is a vital part of the individual's and community's well-being in some rural and remote communities. In these communities, people will often seek out traditional medical practices and bush medicines, especially when modern western medical practices have failed to produce the desired results for the person or family. Many communities use a combination of the two approaches to healing — for example, though Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory may choose western medicine to treat the majority of their sicknesses, they continue to explain the causes of these sicknesses through their traditional beliefs (Reid, 1982).

Traditional healing approaches differ from contemporary medicine in seeking explanation for why and how sickness occurs in an individual.

EXAMPLES OF USES OF BUSH MEDICINE

- ❖ **Rheumatism** cures included cunjevoi juice, which is also recommended to relieve the pain induced by the leaves of the stinging tree (a member of the stinging nettle family).
- ❖ **Coughs and cold symptoms** were relieved through use of various Eucalyptus species, the related Melaleuca, plus the native Hibiscus and a few other species.
- ❖ **Headaches** were cured by various means, but perhaps sometimes the sufferer would prefer to keep the headache. Cribb and Cribb (Cribb & Cribb, 1982) report that the leaves of a climbing plant were crushed and vigorously sniffed. The result is a pungent smell and an “unexpected burning sensation in the nasal passages. Headaches are soon forgotten as the patient wonders whether the top of his head has been blown off”. A gentler cure was the inner bark of the bat's wing coral tree.
- ❖ **Sore eyes** were relieved using sap from the vine *Flagellaria indica*.
- ❖ **Diarrhoea** was treated by eating the bulbs of an orchid, native raspberry leaves, the gum of eucalypts or the root (after soaking in hot water) of the shrub *Grewia retusifolia*.
- ❖ **Snake-bite** was treated in some areas by a poultice from a Coolibah tree.
- ❖ **Itching of insect bites** was treated with the juice from young bracken stems.
- ❖ **Heavy bleeding** could be slowed by firmly pressing crushed and heated leaves of the Peanut tree over the wound. The leaves of the mat rush and paper bark tree were used as bandages for sores and abscesses.
- ❖ **Pregnancy** is said to be avoided by eating the fruit of the Quinine bush or the leaves of a native “cherry”.

Many sicknesses have traditionally been treated using bush medicine.

EXAMPLES OF HEALING PLANTS

The large leaves of the **cotton tree** (*Hibiscustiliaceus*) can be used as dressings on wounds. The leaf is simply heated over the fire and pressed onto the injury until it sticks, stopping the flow of blood. The flower buds of this tree are used as a mild laxative for children. For older children and adults the little white, dome-shaped “bump” inside the bottom of the flower is used for same purpose. The bark of the stem is used for congested chests and for a mother delivering a baby.

Cycad plants are very toxic although the seeds were an important traditional food, when properly treated. The seeds of some species, however, contain an antibiotic.

She Oak (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) grows commonly along the back of beaches. The inner bark, which is a pinkish colour, can be ground up and used to relieve the pain of a toothache when pressed onto the affected tooth. When infused in water, it can be used as a mouthwash to relieve a sore throat – but it should not be swallowed.

¹ Not available in all communities.

In northern Australia, the leaves of several **Melaleuca** species have been used traditionally for treatment of coughs, colds and on sores and burns, either crushed and inhaled or soaked in water to create an infusion. The aromatic oils stimulate cells in the throat to produce more lubricating fluids, thus easing irritations that cause coughs.

Barringtonia racemosa is known as the **fish poison tree** because chemicals (saponins) in the bark stun fish when put in the water. This tree was also used in India as a fever treatment and is now known to have properties similar to quinine, the anti-malarial drug extracted from South American trees.

The core of the trunk of certain **pandanus** trees, notably screw palm/pine (*Pandanus spiralis*) was traditionally used for a number of complaints. Pounded and/or boiled, it was used particularly for diarrhoea and stomach pain but also for mouth sores and toothache and to relieve headaches and flu. In some cases the pith from the prop roots, which support the main trunk, was used. There are records from Groote Eylandt, in the Northern Territory, of pandanus seeds being consumed for contraceptive qualities, but no evidence to support their effectiveness.

The **sandpaper fig** (*Ficus opposita*) has, as the name suggests, leaves that are as rough as sandpaper. They are used, traditionally, to treat fungal skin infections such as ringworm (which is not a worm). The affected skin is rubbed with the leaves until quite raw and the milky rubber from the plant applied. Alternatively the area may be covered with a green ants' nest. The stings and the formic acid from the ants are very painful but apparently a very effective cure (Wet Tropics Management Authority, 2003).

Many different plants have traditionally been used for healing. The types of plant used and the way they are used varies with location.

EXAMPLE OF TRADITIONAL HEALERS: NGANGKARI

The Warlpiri Aborigines of the Northern Territory are one of the largest tribes, with several communities throughout the north-west of Central Australia. The central focus of traditional health and healing in the tribe is through the activities of the ngangkayikirli or traditional healers, commonly referred to as ngangkari or ngangkayi (healing power); Yawulyu ceremonies; healing songs and herbal medicine. In addition there are laws governing behaviour that are aimed at preventing sickness (Devanesen, 2000).

The healers are trained by their predecessors to send their living essence inside the patient's body and remove the influence of bad magic and/or evil spirit, which may attach itself to a stone or stick. Their role is extremely important because most serious illness is thought to be brought about by loss of a vital substance from the body (soul loss), introduction of a foreign and harmful substance into the body (spirit intrusion or possession), or violation of taboos and sorcery (singing). The traditional healers usually gain the power to heal through inheritance or through special spiritual experiences. They possess a spirit called mapanpa, which is associated with healing power. This is different from the spirit that every Warlpiri person has "like a shadow".

Traditional healing goes beyond knowledge of local bush medicines and may have a strong spiritual side.

See also: Unit 3 *Social, emotional and spiritual well-being*

It is not the job of the AHW to judge whether traditional medicine is good or bad, or if it works or not, but rather to understand it in the broader context of helping people get better and understand their own sense of well-being.

IDENTIFYING TRADITIONAL HEALERS

Making contact with traditional healers can be an effective way for AHWs to improve male health outcomes in the community. However, this should be approached with great care and respect as it is a very sensitive issue and some traditional healers will not provide either the bush medicine or their services to those community members who are not skin or kin. This may be particularly true for communities in former mission sites or stations, where cultural and traditional barriers still exist between peoples who had been forced to live together under the Aboriginal Protectorate policies of previous Australian governments since European settlement.

It is recommended that male AHWs seek out the traditional healers within the local community and talk to them about sharing their skills with others in the community.

USE OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINES WITH WESTERN MEDICINE

For chronic conditions such as diabetes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients may turn to alternative remedies that have been thought to improve glycaemic (blood sugar) control. Herbal mixtures were the most commonly used traditional medicine. Though Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not have health issues concerning levels of blood sugar (diabetes) pre-settlement, traditional remedies for other ailments have been used and this was underpinned by a system of spiritual beliefs about illness and healing. The concern is that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sufferers were taking these home-made remedies, they generally did not inform their doctor or health professional. Those that took the traditional medicine reported that they did not know the ingredients as it was made by the community healers and this was secret business known only to them.

Plant medicines have the potential to interact with western medicines. They can reduce the effectiveness of the medicine or increase the effect. AHWs can use their knowledge of community members to assist in avoiding such interactions. If they are aware that patients use bush medicine, there are three areas to consider:

- ❖ engaging with patients to encourage them to talk to the doctor about the traditional medicine they are using in case there are interactions with western medicines;
- ❖ asking the patient's permission to talk to the doctor on their behalf and let the GP know they are using traditional medicines — in some cases the AHW may need to explain that the doctor won't laugh at them or take them off the traditional medicines; and
- ❖ acting as a cultural broker and making sure that the doctor also respects traditional medicines and the use of traditional medicines in the community and incorporates them into his or her practice appropriately.

It is useful for AHWs to encourage people who are using bush medicines to let their doctor know, as there may be interactions with western medicines.

TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AND SPIRITUALITY

Concepts of “traditional practices” and aspects of “Aboriginal spirituality” differ between individuals and across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is important to recognise the difference between communities — programs need to be flexible to meet the specific needs of a community. They are not transferable without alteration just because they were developed by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community.

The holistic model of social and emotional well-being focuses on a balance of the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of a person within their family and community relationships (Adelson, 2005). Traditional practices have been used to reinforce cultural identity, to nourish family relationships and to promote spiritual wellness (Martin Hill, 2003).

Several healing programs have found therapeutic benefits using traditional practices and aspects of Aboriginal spirituality. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also suggest that support groups would be of greater benefit to fathers if they included traditional practices and aspects of Aboriginal spirituality. Promoting and respecting these in men's support groups could create an opportunity for males to regenerate their Aboriginal identity. It could also create a social support network and develop an opportunity for mentorship. The support group could potentially reinforce the men's cultural identity, their role as fathers and, in turn, make them feel more comfortable participating in family-centred services. Aboriginal fathers' support groups, which encompass a holistic approach using traditional practices, could bridge the gap between the displacement of family-centred activities and today's contemporary family-centred program models (Manahana & Ball, 2007).

Aboriginal men's support programs, as well as other community programs meant to facilitate healing, should promote and respect the use of traditional practices and aspects of Aboriginal spirituality.

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