

Study examines new ways to promote active living in remote communities

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With an acute need to tackle shocking levels of chronic disease in remote Indigenous communities, researchers at the Menzies School of Health Research have conducted the first ever detailed study documenting Indigenous perspectives on active living.

Lead author, Sharon Thompson said the marked health disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations and the need to involve Indigenous people in finding solutions were driving factors behind her research.

“The burden of chronic disease in remote Indigenous Australia is more than double that of non-Indigenous populations and increasing participation in physical activity could improve the situation,” Thompson said.

The study featured interviews with members of two remote Northern Territory communities: one in the tropical Top End and the other in the arid Central Desert region.

Thompson said their research showed that the meaning of physical activity is different in remote Indigenous cultures so Western-style physical activity health promotion is unlikely to be effective for everyone.

“This suggests that health professionals must listen to and involve Indigenous Australians when developing culturally appropriate remote health promotion strategies.

“When participants talked about being physically active they talked about working and walking on the land with significant others - usually family. They described work and cultural activities - like hunting and teaching others about the land - and they want to do more of these kinds of physical activities,” Thompson said.

From interviews it was clear that adults did not engage in physical activity just to improve their health. While it was acceptable for children to swim in pools, run and ride bikes, the thought of adults partaking in these kinds of activities was not.

Thompson said physical activity in remote communities is strongly associated with being productive and meaningfully engaged with the environment and culture.

“As a ranger who participated in the project explained - his work allowed him to meet his traditional physical activity and dietary needs, and the needs of the environment in a culturally appropriate way.”

This research supports the importance of ‘Caring for country’, a term which encompasses the management of natural and cultural resources and associated activities, as a broad inter-sectoral health strategy.

“People on remote communities want to live healthier lives and there are several excellent environmental initiatives helping them to achieve this, such as the Working on Country Indigenous ranger programs, those overseen by the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA); as well as youth diversion and outdoor education programs that enable time to be spent walking on country with significant elders,” Thompson said.

“However, greater cohesion between government departments and the many stakeholders in combination with more research is needed to show how these kinds of environmental and youth diversion programs can provide effective models of Indigenous physical activity health promotion.”

This research, authored by Sharon Thompson, Julie Brimblecombe and Richard Chenhall, is published in the open access journal, *BMC Public Health*; the full article can be accessed [here](#). The study was funded by the Northern Territory Department of Health, Nutrition and Physical Activity Program.

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Menzies Background

Menzies School of Health Research are Australia's only Medical Research Institute dedicated to improving Indigenous health and wellbeing. We have a 27-year history of scientific discovery and public health achievement. Menzies work at the frontline and collaborate broadly, partnering with over 60 Indigenous communities across Northern Australia to create resources, grow local skills, and find enduring solutions to problems that matter.