CREATING A NETWORK OF KNOWLEDGE: THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCHERS

PARTNERSHIP SOUGHT: $106,000 FOR 1 YEAR; $325,000 FOR 3 YEARS

Increasing workforce participation for Indigenous people has been identified by state and federal governments and the business community as an important strategy to improving life outcomes and the social disparities for Indigenous Australians.

The Menzies School of Health Research believes that a significant and supported Indigenous staff body are critical to the delivery of effective health services to Indigenous Australians. The mandate is very real at Menzies and can be illustrated through the establishment of its own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy in 2010 which continues to be managed by its Indigenous Capacity Building Unit (ICBU).

Currently 10 per cent of Menzies workforce is Indigenous and employment retention rates are on par with non-Indigenous employees. At any one time Menzies employs up to 60 community-based researchers (CBRs) in casual and short-term employment. In 2013, Menzies successfully partnered with the Northern Territory Government’s Indigenous Workforce Participation Initiative to deliver a pilot program that would officially establish a network of CBRs.

Since the delivery of this program, over 50 per cent of participants remain employed. Menzies believes further employment outcomes can be offered through its relationships with government, other research institutes and community organisations.

THE NEED

ABS 2011 data revealed

- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander labour force participation rate of 55.8 per cent continues to significantly lag behind the non-Indigenous rate of 76.4 per cent. Additionally, a greater proportion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participating in the labour force were unemployed, with the unemployment rate more than three times higher than the non-Indigenous rate.

- One quarter of Indigenous people aged 15 years and over lived in remote areas. In comparison less than 2 per cent of non-Indigenous people aged 15 years and over lived in remote areas.

- 76 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population who had attained Year 12 or Certificate II or above were participating in the labour force. Not only were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with these formal educational qualifications more likely to be in the labour force, they were more likely to be successful in finding employment.

- There are approximately only 204 Indigenous medical practitioners currently working in Australia. Of these only a handful have research training.

PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITY

The 2011 Census data revealed that health care and social assistance was one of the top three industry employers of Indigenous people. It was also one of the top three industries of employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

A partnership with Menzies under this project will assist in growing an established network of Indigenous community based researchers and community health support staff. It will enable them to access and obtain accredited and non-accredited training combined with an ongoing mentoring and support program and professional development opportunities.

The initiative will improve participant’s employment prospects, support the writing of resumes and job applications and foster proficiency with communications and social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn to share experiences and job opportunities.

By encouraging networking across communities (where culturally appropriate) and face-to-face contact with members of the Menzies Indigenous Capacity Building Unit, the needs and aspirations of Indigenous employees will be communicated back to Menzies Project Managers for discussion.

A flexible training schedule, to accommodate senior Indigenous CBRs with other community responsibilities, has been adopted to ensure appropriate representation across communities.

The ‘Working in Two Worlds’ workshops, in conjunction with existing training, addresses the concept of working in research as a western construct not embedded in Indigenous culture and social constructs. This workshop has been designed around cultural differences, cross cultural communication, networking and health and wellbeing.
PARTNERSHIP IMPACT

Menzies has already identified the need to continue to support the graduate CBRs who completed the 2013 pilot program. The continued fostering and growth of its Indigenous workforce database and the maintaining the ‘Menzies Mob’ Facebook page are also key deliverables for the ICBU.

By extending the 2013 pilot program Menzies can further employment outcomes through its relationships with government, other research institutes and community organisations. Participant feedback from a mentoring program held by the ICBU in July 2014 was overwhelmingly positive with CBRs indicating that they really enjoyed the program, significantly expanded their networks, and learnt new mentoring skills.

Extending the pilot program will increase the pool of workforce-ready CBRs, and will build their confidence to seek employment, and will support them in engaging in health research activities benefiting their communities. CBRs utilising the ‘Menzies Mob’ Facebook page will share their stories, experiences and information to support each other in their work and employment prospects.

Program success will be gauged by the incremental increase in Indigenous participation in health research activities with a long-term view to the success of building Indigenous leadership in health employment and monitoring how many CBRs seek higher academic pathways or a vocational leadership role as a result.

In July 2014, the Indigenous Capacity Building Unit (ICBU), delivered a mentoring program to senior experienced Community Based Researchers (CBRs) from remote communities of the Northern Territory. These workshops provided a valuable two-way learning experience.

In an Aboriginal learning ways activity the CBR’s formed two groups and later demonstrated their ways of learning/doing by developing posters based on the seasons.

**Poster one – Season bush food**
- Teaching cultures
- Listening and learning
- Stories
- Hunting
- Dancing

**Poster two – Seasonal Calendar**
- Learning from the sea and land
- Listening and feeling the winds
- Describing the appropriate times for doing research
- Yolngu way of learning
- Singing songs and dancing
- Rain and thunder in the back ground is usually a time to reflect and think about a lost one/ family. It’s not a time for working
- Being mindful of ceremonies and other community commitments (they come first)

This quote “Rain and thunder in the back ground is usually a time to reflect and think about lost one/ family and not a time for working” was from Djilirri Garawirrjta, CBR, Galiwin’ku Community, Elcho Island.