

Unique study uncovers barriers to cervical screening for Indigenous women

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's voices are at the center of a new study in to barriers to Australia's cervical screening program.

Indigenous Australian women experience a higher burden of cervical cancer than other women and currently only one-third participate in cervical screening. The study aimed to describe experiences and views of Indigenous women who had participated in screening in order to provide insight into factors that support women to access screening services.

Led by Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies), the research team held yarns (a culturally-appropriate interview technique) with 50 Indigenous Australian women aged 25-70 years who had completed cervical screening in the past five years, with the interviews conducted by Indigenous women researchers.

Lead author, Menzies' post-doctoral researcher Dr Tamara Butler, said the study was strengthened by a research approach that centred Indigenous Australian women's voices.

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience a higher burden of cervical cancer. Screening can prevent cervical cancer. We wanted to learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women about the factors that supported women to screen," Dr Butler said.

"Analysis of our yarning identified six key themes: screening as a means of staying strong and in control; overcoming fears, shame, and negative experiences of screening; needing to talk openly about screening; the value of trusting relationships with screening providers; logistical barriers; and overcoming privacy concerns for women employed at Primary Health Care Centres (PHCCs).

"Despite describing screening as shameful, invasive and uncomfortable, women perceived it as a way of staying healthy and exerting control over their health. This ultimately supported their participation and a sense of empowerment.

"The women expressed that they valued open discussion about screening and strong relationships with health care providers and in addition, we identified logistical barriers, including clinic opening hours and transport services and specific barriers, such as privacy concerns faced by women employed at PHCCs."

Senior author, Menzies honorary research fellow, Dr Lisa Whop said the study's findings may inform future public health campaigns for other cancer screening programs as well as inform strategies in the push to eliminate cervical cancer.

“Our study indicated that screening should be conducted in a way that empowers Indigenous women to feel in control of their bodies, health and health decision-making.

“It also showed that Indigenous women’s views and rights to control their health may support an improvement in the uptake of screening,” Dr Whop said.

The study, *Indigenous Australian women's experiences of participation in cervical screening*, was recently published in the PLOS ONE journal.

The full paper can be found [here](#).

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Menzies School of Health Research

Menzies School of Health Research is one of Australia’s leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving Indigenous, global and tropical health. Menzies has a history of over 30 years of scientific discovery and public health achievement. Menzies works at the frontline, joining with partners across the Asia-Pacific as well as Indigenous communities across northern and central Australia. Menzies collaborates to create new knowledge, grow local skills and find enduring solutions to problems that matter.