

Menzies and Congress secure national funding to help reimagine primary health care models for remote Central Australia

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Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) and the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress) are proud to announce their joint role in a newly funded collaboration to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal communities in remote Central Australia, through the Medical Research Future Fund's (MRFF) 2023 Multidisciplinary Models of Primary Care Grant Opportunity.

The \$2.8 million grant over five years will support the Northern Territory Innovative Multidisciplinary Models of Primary Care Consortium in Remote Central Australia (the Consortium) – a unique partnership led by Congress and supported by Menzies alongside other health services including nine remote Aboriginal community clinics across the region.

The Consortium aims to reshape the way primary health care is delivered in remote and very remote Aboriginal communities, where health needs are high and local systems face extraordinary challenges due to distance, workforce shortages and complex chronic disease burdens.

Through the co-design, implementation and evaluation of two new multidisciplinary models of primary care – one for town-based services in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) and one for remote Central Australian communities – the Consortium will strengthen care continuity, chronic disease management, service integration and access for Aboriginal people.

A key feature of the project is its commitment to place-based research and capacity-building, embedding local researchers into health services to ensure future reforms are driven by strong evidence, community priorities and Aboriginal leadership. The Consortium will also actively build research capacity in remote services in collaboration with the Central Australian Academic Health Sciences Network (CAAHSN) – creating new opportunities for local knowledge generation and health system innovation.

The Consortium brings together town and remote Aboriginal health services, including several clinics in Mparntwe, along with Western Aranda Aboriginal Health Corporation, Mutitjulu Health Service, Utju Health Service, Amoonguna Health Service, Mpwelarrre Health Service, and Imanpa, Kaltukatjara and Yulara Clinics.

Menzies' contribution will be driven by a strong research team, with Chief Investigators Professor John Wakerman, Associate Professor Alexandra Edelman, Associate Professor Deborah Russell, Associate Professor Supriya Mathew and Dr Winnie Chen bringing deep expertise in health systems research, remote service delivery and policy translation. From Congress, Chief Investigators Ms Marah Prior, Dr Vahab Baghbanian, Ms Carlissa Broome and Dr Sam Heard will bring a depth of experience in primary health care service delivery and research in Central Australia.

This initiative will pave the way for strengthened health system integration, locally driven research, and more sustainable, effective primary care for some of Australia's most geographically isolated communities.

Quotes attributable to lead investigator and Central Australian Aboriginal Congress Chief Medical Officer Public Health, Adjunct Professor John Boffa:

"This grant represents a significant step toward further improving the quality of primary care systems in Central Australia.

"We continue to implement and evaluate new models of multidisciplinary primary care particularly aimed at improving continuity of care and chronic disease outcomes, which represent 80 percent of the current health gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. We have also implemented a new model of after-hours care for remote communities, which will form part of the project along with the increased deployment of Aboriginal allied health assistants."

Quotes attributable to Menzies School of Health Research Remote Health Systems and Climate Change Centre (RHC3) Lead, Associate Professor Alexandra Edelman:

"This collaboration builds on a strong foundation of trust and research partnership between Menzies and Congress, reflecting Menzies' commitment to place-based research that responds to health needs in remote Australia. The research includes a focus on sustaining successful models and sharing findings with national networks to shape health system reform, in conjunction with the Menzies-led NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence for Strengthening Health Systems in Remote Australia (CRESTRA) and Australia's National Multidisciplinary Primary Care Research, Policy and Advocacy Consortium."

Quotes attributable to Central Australian Aboriginal Congress General Manager Health Services Division, Ms Marah Prior:

"We know that the community-controlled service delivery model is the best practice for Aboriginal health care and a key part of Closing the Gap. This project builds from our work with remote health service boards to conceptualise new primary care models that will improve Aboriginal health in Central Australia. It offers an opportunity to independently evaluate services and programs to ensure we make a difference for our communities."

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About Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies)

Menzies is at the forefront of health and medical research dedicated to improving the lives of peoples across the Northern Territory, Asia Pacific and beyond. By joining scientific knowledge with community wisdom, Menzies strives to Close the Gap, and shape a healthier, more equitable future where communities can thrive.

About Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress)

Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress) is a large Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service (ACCHS) based in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). Established more than 50 years ago, Congress is one of the most experienced organisations in the country in Aboriginal health, a national leader in primary health care, and a strong advocate for the health of our people. Congress delivers services to more than 17,000 people living in Mparntwe and remote communities across Central Australia including Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa), Ntaria (Hermannsburg), Wallace Rockhole, Utju (Areyonga), Mutitjulu, Amoonguna, Imanpa, Kaltukatjara (Docker River), and Yulara.