

Midnight basketball, touch footy, fishing and country music: UNSW study finds they help reduce alcohol harms in Aboriginal communities

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An Australian first partnership between researchers at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of NSW and four rural and remote Aboriginal communities in NSW has led to significant reductions in alcohol related harms, as well as increases in perceptions of community wellbeing and safety, a community meeting in Griffith will hear today.

The unique feature of the partnership, which has been funded by NSW Ministry of Health, is that each community has identified activities and solutions specific to their own community but implemented them in an innovative, standardised way that allows the researchers to apply scientifically rigorous methods to measure the benefits.

Since 2014 Aboriginal Elders and community members from Griffith, Narrandera, Lake Cargellio and Murrin Bridge have been working together with researchers from UNSW to design and implement community led programs aimed at providing alternatives to drinking while at the same time empowering local communities to devise their own solutions.

Implementation of these different activities in each community was managed by a local Aboriginal co-ordinator. Griffith has established a regular Midnight Basketball competition that runs on a high-risk time, namely Friday nights. Lake Cargelligo and Murrin Bridge have had competitions in fishing, touch footy and boxing. Narrandera has had indoor soccer, community movie nights and even a country music talent quest. And cross-cutting all of these activities has been a strong focus on re-connecting with culture.

UNSW Professor Anthony Shakeshaft of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre who has led the project with PhD student Mieke Snijder said existing data analysed prior to the program being implemented showed that young people were overrepresented in alcohol-related police incidents. The remote communities were chosen because of existing evidence that alcohol related harms increase as communities become more remote, said Professor Shakeshaft.

Instead of the researchers imposing what they might regard as best practice solutions on the communities, each community was tasked with designing their own solutions, as long as those solutions aligned with three core elements that were standardized across all communities: providing alternatives to drinking and therefore reduce opportunities for alcohol related harms to occur; increasing the community's sense of empowerment; and better utilisation of existing services.

One of the community co-ordinators, Jamie O'Neill from Lake Cargelligo, said that this community-led approach has been critical: "I have lost count of the number of people who have stopped me in the street to ask me when the next activities are, and the equality of the

partnership between my community and the researchers in Sydney has been really important – everyone is just up-front about the knowledge and skills they can contribute.”

Early results have been promising says final year doctoral student Ms Snijder who is completing her PhD on the project.

“A third of community members who were surveyed reported feeling safer at night, and more than 10% reported reductions in alcohol injuries and verbal abuse,” she said. “Crucially though police data indicates a significant reduction in Aboriginal victims of alcohol crime,” she added. “There was also a strong but not yet significant trend toward fewer Aboriginal people involved alcohol related crime.”

Professor Shakeshaft who is an international expert on community interventions to reduce drug and alcohol related harms will present the communities with data on the impacts of their efforts at the four communities over the next week.

He said that the study could be a game changer that will have far reaching implications for how community responses to social problems including drug and alcohol related violence are designed and implemented so that researchers can be confident that they are effective and can be translated to other communities.

“It is increasingly recognised that effective and sustained solutions to improving the health of Aboriginal Australians will be those that are designed and led by Aboriginal people,” said Professor Shakeshaft. “The problem is how to bring together the leadership, skills and knowledge of Aboriginal communities with the highly specialized, real-world evaluation skills of senior researchers.

“I’m certainly not suggesting this project has solved all the difficulties of embedding scientifically robust evaluation into community-based public health programs, but it’s the first time we’ve come up with a workable partnership that starts to solve the big-ticket conceptual problems. And it has largely come about from trying to respond to Aboriginal calls for them to design and lead their own solutions.”

Key findings to date

- A significant reduction in Aboriginal victims of alcohol related crime;
- A strong, but as yet not significant trend, towards fewer Aboriginal people involved in alcohol related crime
- Community members feeling safer at night, perceive that there are fewer alcohol injuries and verbal abuse, and feel more able to achieve change in their communities
- An effective, Aboriginal-led partnership between regional communities in NSW and researchers in Sydney.

To speak to Professor Shakeshaft, Mieke Snijder or the communities involved in the project contact:

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