

Work of the Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet

Introduction

The Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet's mission is to contribute to improving the health of Australia's Indigenous people by facilitating the sharing and exchange of relevant, high-quality knowledge.

We address our mission by:

- undertaking research;
- disseminating relevant information;
- facilitating information exchange; and
- providing Internet and related training.

The HealthInfoNet takes a broad view of Indigenous health, along the lines used by the National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party, and expanded by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO):

health is not just the physical wellbeing of an individual, but the social, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of the whole community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their community.

Thus, we aim to facilitate the sharing of knowledge about a wide variety of issues of relevance to Indigenous health to the many potential users of this knowledge. The potential users include policy makers, health service providers, program managers, clinicians and other health professionals (including Indigenous health workers), researchers, academics and other teachers, students, and the general community.

Most of the knowledge generated by our research activities is made available on the HealthInfoNet's Internet site (www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au). This knowledge includes detailed overviews of specific health topics, introductory material about specific conditions, best practice case studies and other lessons learned, regularly updated summaries of Indigenous health, and brief answers to frequently asked questions.

We also support yarning places (electronic networks) in specific areas of Indigenous health. Our yarning places allow people with common interests and purposes to share information, knowledge and experience, even when they live in different locations, come from different backgrounds and work for different organisations – see www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/yarningplaces. Membership of a yarning place, which is free, provides: contact details for members (with their approval); e-yarning (an electronic board for active discussion and debate about relevant issues); and e-message stick (a list for communicating with all members by email).

In our efforts to support actions based on knowledge, the HealthInfoNet also works directly with Indigenous people to improve their use of the Internet, and assists Indigenous and other relevant agencies in Internet site development - to make their knowledge and information accessible.

The work of the Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet is undertaken currently by a small part-time team based in Kurongkurl Katitjin, the School of Indigenous Australian Studies at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth. We are assisted by an extensive Australia-wide network of HealthInfoNet Consultants.

The research functions of the HealthInfoNet are supported by funds from a variety of sources. The Internet-based functions of knowledge and information dissemination and exchange are made possible by grants (particularly from the Australian Department of Health and Ageing). The training functions are supported by external grants, and Internet site development work is undertaken largely on a cost-recovery basis.

The HealthInfoNet has achieved recognition already for its innovative approaches to the generation and sharing of knowledge. This recognition includes being chosen as a finalist in the prestigious Stockholm Challenge Award (the international award that highlights the benefits that information and communication technology can bring to people and society) and winning the Public Health Association of Australia's inaugural Eberhard Wenzel Online Award.

Our Internet site

The HealthInfoNet believes that by making high quality knowledge accessible to professionals involved in the area of Indigenous health, their knowledge, skills and performance will be greatly enhanced. For students and the general community, the HealthInfoNet's knowledge dissemination and facilitation functions will lead to a better understanding of Indigenous health and related areas. Our Internet site is the public face of the HealthInfoNet and our main means of disseminating relevant knowledge and other information (both our own research and the research of others).

Health

The health section of our site contains much of the Internet-accessible knowledge and information on Indigenous health. The material within the health section has been organised according to subject area and is updated as new material becomes available. In addition to health status summaries and overviews, and information on births, deaths, and hospitalisation, this section contains knowledge and information on a range of health conditions and issues, including:

Chronic diseases	Infectious diseases	Other aspects
Cardiovascular disease	HiB/meningitis	Growth and nutrition
Cancer	Gastrointestinal	Mental health
Respiratory disease	Hepatitis	Injury
Diabetes	Tuberculosis	Disability
Renal disease	STIs	Substance use
Other	HIV/AIDS	Alcohol use
	Other	Tobacco control
		Volatile substances
		Injecting drug use
		Other substances
		Oral health
		Ear conditions
		Eye conditions
		Health risk factors
		Other

The sections on health conditions are being restructured progressively to maximise their usefulness. The new structure includes basic information about the particular condition; up-to-date summaries, overviews and reviews; a list of key references; a downloadable bibliography of relevant sources; details of recent journal articles, publications and conference presentations; a list of theses; preventive and clinical guidelines; and links to relevant organisations and other Internet-based materials.

Population

In line with our broad view of Indigenous health, we complement the health section of our site with sections on population, environment, and programs. The population section provides information about Indigenous population estimates and distribution, and issues surrounding identification of Indigenous people in data collections and the validity of health information. It provides information also about various characteristics of the Indigenous population - births (numbers, birth rates, birth weights, etc.) and deaths (death rates, life expectancy, causes of death, etc.) - and the health of various population sub-groups (infants and children; adolescents; women, men, and older people).

Environment

The material in the environment section has been categorised into: cultural aspects; social environment; and physical environment. The sub-section on cultural aspects contains our special page, *Images of Indigenous Australia*, which features exhibitions of Indigenous visual arts and crafts. Information about Indigenous culture, traditional medicine, cross-cultural training, programs and services will be added also to

this sub-section. Under social environment we include details about a variety of social aspects (such as education, income and employment). This will be extended to include information about issues such as racism and discrimination.

The section on the physical environment, covering housing and associated aspects (such as water and electricity supply, and waste and sewage disposal) has been expanded recently, but is planned for further expansion.

Programs

The programs section will, in time, include a wide range of information about programs and services related to Indigenous health. Programs and services are developed and run within particular policy contexts, which are summarised in the section entitled 'Policies'. 'Major developments in national Indigenous health policy since 1967', is the first of a planned series of timelines in which we will summarise developments in various aspects of Indigenous health policy. These timelines should assist people to understand the historical and current context of Indigenous health, and, hopefully, learn from past experiences in addressing the health disadvantages experienced by Indigenous people.

The other sub-sections, 'Health promotion', 'Health services' and 'Health workforce', address other major aspects about programs and services related to Indigenous health.

States

This section provides the opportunity for information specific to the States and Territories to be made available. Western Australia is the only jurisdiction that has supported the development of a State-specific section to date, but it is hoped that other States and Territories will also recognise the value of such sections.

Overviews

This section focuses on overviews of Indigenous health, both produced by the HealthInfoNet and by other agencies/groups. Our *Overview of Australian Indigenous health* is updated regularly as important new information becomes available. It is provided online in both HTML and PDF forms. Hard-copy versions are published periodically.

Key facts

We also provide a plain-language summary of Indigenous health and frequently asked questions (FAQs) about specific health issues in our 'Key facts' section. Developed largely in response to users' queries and requests, our FAQs provide answers on a wide range of Indigenous health issues. Types of questions include 'What do we know about Indigenous mortality?' and 'What do Indigenous people say about their health and health services?' Answers are given as brief, plain-language summaries.

The health and health-related sections of our site are supplemented by other site-based information resources, such as our electronic journal, the Australian Indigenous Health*Bulletin* and the Australian Indigenous Health*Bibliography*.

Australian Indigenous HealthBulletin

The Health*Bulletin* is a peer reviewed journal (endorsed by the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training) that provides the latest in Indigenous health information in a variety of relevant ways, as well as publishing peer-reviewed original articles and brief reports about applied research. Our journal takes full advantage of the dynamic nature of the Internet. Rather than have material waiting 'behind the scenes' for weeks or months until the next publication, each edition is updated as soon as the material is ready, forming a 'Health*Bulletin* in progress'. At the end of three months, the 'Health*Bulletin* in progress' is closed and the next edition commences. The Health*Bulletin* includes the following sections:

- *Original articles* - original peer-reviewed research reports;
- *Reviews* - original peer-reviewed overviews of Indigenous health and/or specific Indigenous health conditions;
- *Brief reports* - detailed information about programs, and brief research reports;
- *Current topics* - information about major public events, new programs, etc.;
- *Journal articles* - details and abstracts of articles appearing in a wide range of journals;

- *Reports* - details and summaries of recent reports and other publications;
- *Resources* - details of brochures, posters, videos, and other health promotion materials;
- *Conference abstracts and papers* - abstracts or full texts of papers presented at conferences;
- *Theses* - details and abstracts of recently completed theses and treatises;
- *Book reviews* - reviews of recent books of relevance to Indigenous health; and
- *Website reviews* - summaries of websites of relevance to Indigenous health.

Australian Indigenous HealthBibliography

Our bibliography is available on the HealthInfoNet site, but may be accessed also through other avenues. It contains more than 10,000 items directly related to Indigenous health. Sources of information include: journal articles, books and book chapters, government and other reports, theses, discussion/working papers, unpublished materials and conference papers. The searchable bibliographic database is available on the HealthInfoNet site or from the CD-ROMs *AUSThealth* and *ATSIROM*. The bibliography is available also on disk in EndNote format. (EndNote is a bibliographic software package.)

Quality assurance

The HealthInfoNet addresses quality assurance in two main ways. First, we have documented procedures for all aspects of our day-to-day operations. These procedures ensure that all materials have been subjected to quality control checks before being added to our site. The nature of the checks varies to some degree. All important content additions are checked by the Director, who brings to the function more than 25 years involvement in the area of Indigenous health information, and substantial experience in both descriptive epidemiology and editorial functions. This experience enables him to provide high levels of both technical and editorial expertise in ensuring the quality of materials added to the site.

To complement our internal procedures, we have established a network of HealthInfoNet Consultants, whose functions include peer-review of any substantial academic materials to be added to the site. Depending on the nature of the material to be added, the Consultants can also play a more direct role in the development of the material itself. An example is our development of Indigenous health policy timelines. One of our Graduate Research Assistants worked closely with a HealthInfoNet Consultant in the development of these guidelines. Similar joint work is used for the development of substantial overviews of specific health conditions. To date, around 100 senior Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have been appointed as HealthInfoNet Consultants.

Other information functions

As well as making relevant information available generally on our Internet site, we undertake also a number of specialised information functions.

Services for facilitating information exchange

The HealthInfoNet offers a number of services designed to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and information. Our listserv (an email network) provides a forum for those wishing to discuss issues relating to Indigenous health. (See our Internet site for subscription details.) As noted above, we also provide yarning places for specific Indigenous health issues.

Alternatively, organisations and individuals may distribute information on the site's electronic noticeboard. The site provides information on courses, up-coming conferences, and the latest media items. The HealthInfoNet also provides a general information service for those with specific queries.

Internet training

The Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet works directly with Indigenous people to provide them with the skills to access Internet-based information. By promoting our site to Indigenous people we endeavour to reduce the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Internet access. Internet and related training is provided to Indigenous health workers and other staff and students from Indigenous organisations to enable them to take advantage of the wide range of relevant information available on our site and the Internet more generally. This has included the provision of Internet introduction and training sessions to employees and students from a variety of Indigenous agencies and organisations.

To reach an even wider audience, the HealthInfoNet has also conducted HealthInternet cafés at a number of recent conferences, including:

- Aboriginal Health Council of WA ACCHO sector conference, May 2006, Perth;
- National Symposium Promoting Healthy Pregnancy within Indigenous Communities, May 2006, Perth;
- Chronic Diseases Network Conference. September 2005, Darwin; and
- 8th National Rural Health Conference, March 2005, Alice Springs.

The cafés are designed to introduce conference attendees to online services and technology that provide information on Indigenous health. They are conducted in a supportive and culturally appropriate manner and pay particular attention to the needs of participants with limited computer or Internet experience.

The most recent of HealthInfoNet workshops for Indigenous health workers was conducted in Perth in March 2005, with others to be conducted if resources become available.

Internet site development

In the past, the HealthInfoNet has assisted Indigenous and other relevant agencies with Internet site development, thus making their information more accessible. Substantial sites have been developed on a cost-recovery basis, with most sites hosted and maintained by the HealthInfoNet until such time as the organisation acquires sufficient expertise to manage the site independently. A number of sites are still being maintained, but only one is being developed currently.