

Menzies trains community educators to give infants a healthy start

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Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) has provided training to Indigenous community based workers in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia to evaluate a vital program about infant nutrition and the preparation of healthy foods.

Menzies Senior Research Fellow, Dr Kate Senior has been involved in the Fred Hollows Foundation Early Childhood Nutrition and Anaemia Prevention 'Sprinkles' program since 2011.

The program involved local community based workers regularly visiting families to give a vitamin and mineral supplement 'Sprinkles' to add to their baby's food as well as providing support and education about nutrition and preparation of healthy foods. Each single dose sachet of Sprinkles contains enough iron to meet their daily requirement, along with micronutrients such as zinc, iodine, vitamins and folic.

With many Indigenous infants experiencing severe iron deficiency, systemic intervention programs such as Sprinkles were critical to improving nutrition and helping to prevent the health problems that can occur later in life due to deficiencies in childhood.

Dr Senior said this was particularly pertinent if such interventions were combined with community based education about nutrition and the preparation of healthy food for infants and children.

"The model for the program was unique in that the community based workers were trained to deliver both the supplements and the supporting education, and that's excellent for building capacity within communities.

"We worked with Ngukurr community workers, Amelia Huddleston and Angelina Joshua as well as Fred Hollows and Sunrise Health Service in Katherine to develop a set of culturally appropriate research questions," she said.

"From there we conducted a workshop drawing together all the community based workers from the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland to develop their interviewing skills and their ability to accurately record the information they were obtaining."

Dr Senior recently joined more than 20 of the budding community educators who had travelled to Darwin for the final component of the program at Menzies.

"The final workshop brought together all our participants and their interviews to learn how to analyse the material they had collected and draw meaningful conclusions," she said.

"As well as giving Indigenous infants a better nutritional start to life and building community and maternal education, the program is offering local women real employment and training opportunities by teaching them how to run and evaluate their own programs.

"Working in close partnership with Fred Hollows Project Coordinator, Danielle Aquino and Menzies' Dr Janet Helmer ensured the program had a strong level of buy in from the community workers as well as strengthening our ties in the communities."

A final report will be tabled and sent to the Fred Hollows Foundation for their overall evaluation of the early childhood nutrition and anaemia prevention program. The Sprinkles program is a collaborative project between the Fred Hollows Foundation, Department of Health, Sunrise Health Service, Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Council, Boab Health Service and Queensland Health.

The Fred Hollows Foundation has contributed substantial funding for the initiative.

Photos are available upon request.

Media contact: Richmond Hodgson

communications@menzies.edu.au; 08 8922 8598; 0447 275 415

Background

Menzies School of Health Research is a national leader in Indigenous and tropical health research. It is the only medical research institute in the Northern Territory, with more than 300 staff working in over 60 communities across central and northern Australia, as well as developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Menzies is also a significant contributor to health education and research training.