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### A holistic approach to Aboriginal well health screening

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## A holistic approach to Aboriginal well health screening

### Abstract

Moving past crisis management to the implementation of effective primary health care programs is key to rapid improvement in Aboriginal health. Historically, service delivery has been based on a sickness and disease model rather than an approach that focuses towards well health. Well health incorporates disease prevention, early intervention and management to restore physical and mental health, together with social health and wellbeing. Social health and wellbeing are crucial components of the holistic approach required to address the determinants of health, socio-economic disadvantage and continuing grief which are evident in many remote Aboriginal communities.

### Disciplines

Medicine and Health Sciences | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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# A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ABORIGINAL WELL HEALTH SCREENING

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## Introduction

Moving past crisis management to the implementation of effective primary health care programs is key to rapid improvement in Aboriginal health. Historically, service delivery has been based on a sickness and disease model rather than an approach that focuses towards well health. Well health incorporates disease prevention, early intervention and management to restore physical and mental health, together with social health and wellbeing. Social health and wellbeing are crucial components of the holistic approach required to address the determinants of health, socio-economic disadvantage and continuing grief which are evident in many remote Aboriginal communities.

## The Aboriginal Well Health checklist

This article describes a well health checklist used as a comprehensive screening tool in a remote South Australian community. The checklist formed an essential part of the Aboriginal Well Women's Health (AWWH) program, adapted and developed from an existing program in Central Australia,<sup>1,2</sup> in consultation with local health care providers, to meet the needs of Aboriginal women in this community. The checklist has also been modified for use in the Aboriginal Health Service clinic to alter the focus from crisis management towards primary health care for all clients.

## A primary health approach

Primary health care, defined as both a philosophy and the first level of accessible health care,<sup>3</sup> is essential for health improvement and wellbeing. Prevention strategies such as immunisation, and screening processes for cancer and other diseases, combined with the provision of health information that enables early detection of illness, are fundamental components of effective primary health care. Health management options are then broadened to include monitoring of acute and chronic conditions with a greater choice of treatment options, rather than simply management of acute illness.

The well health screening process, with improved health information to the community, enables better health self-management and improved lifestyle choices. In addition,

through confidence in their health care provider, the process facilitates earlier attendance by individuals at the clinic when acute illness does occur. In the past, community members often only attended the clinic when they were so acutely ill that they required transfer to a major hospital.

In remote Aboriginal communities, resources are limited and a significant burden is placed on local health care providers to provide services for a community. These communities have a high incidence of illness and comorbidity of disease (the occurrence of two or more diseases or disorders at one time). Community health services often appear to be reactionary to a crisis when it presents, and opportunities to provide a comprehensive primary health care approach have been limited by the capacity of health care teams, in contrast to the high-level of assistance required by the community.

Aboriginal women living in remote areas have limited access and opportunity to attend culturally appropriate services for well health screening. A female medical officer with expertise in Aboriginal women's health and a women's health nurse is required to provide a culturally acceptable service in a safe environment. The AWWH program provides a safe and effective environment for providing health care and incorporates the use of the Well Women's Health checklist as an assessment and documentation tool.

## The Well Women's Health (WWH) checklist

The WWH checklist complies with the components of the Medicare 710 health assessment for Aboriginal people<sup>4</sup> as a holistic screening tool for physical, mental and social health and wellbeing. The tool allows the health care provider to gain an accurate picture of each woman's overall health. In a confidential and safe environment, women are able to discuss their acute and chronic illnesses, sexual health, family history, nutritional issues and social habits including alcohol and drug use. Other issues such as homelessness, lack of basic services including water, electricity and cooking facilities and incidence of family violence are also reviewed. Following documentation of the health history on the WWH checklist, issues of concern are addressed and monitored in follow-up visits, with referrals to specialist appointments organised.

Consisting of three pages, the checklist provides cues for the clinic team to enable a systematic and consistent approach to well health checks. The first two pages (see next page) provide questions that inquire about general physical, mental and social health and wellbeing, and the third page (not included) is specifically designed for sexual health. Small graphic icons add visual reminders to ensure all questions are addressed.

The design of the tool allows the collection of detailed documentation on actual or potential health problems or risk factors and follows up with referral recommendations. Some questions require a tick or cross response, others, clinical observations or screening results and there is also space for written comments. The WWH checklist can be kept in the patient file and data can be collated on computer



remote communities is implicated in extensive rheumatic heart disease that is often undiagnosed until significant cardiac insufficiency is evident.<sup>12</sup> This affects other body systems reducing both the quality of life and life expectancy.

In mental health, comorbidity is used to describe two or more mental health problems. For example, alcohol dependence and depression are characterised by their symptoms rather than their cause.<sup>13</sup> Tobacco is also viewed as a drug commonly used by people who have other mental health issues. Comorbidity is an important issue as one illness may impact and influence another, worsening symptoms (e.g. depression may increase alcohol consumption and alcohol related conditions such as liver impairment may also affect treatment regimes).

### **The Well Health checklist as a primary health care tool in the clinic**

Use of the Well Health checklist to provide a primary health care focus in prevention, earlier detection and management of acute and chronic diseases, will assist in faster health improvement. Providing a holistic approach to health, and access to health information programs that provide for better self management, builds knowledge and capacity in the Aboriginal community and local health care providers. The checklist as a screening tool was initially used for Well Women's Health but has been modified to encompass all clients. In 2005, the AWWH program model was used to develop an Aboriginal Well Men's Health program using this checklist with an additional page addressing men's sexual health.<sup>14</sup> This men's program is now running at alternative times to the women's program to address Aboriginal men's health in this remote community.

### **Conclusion**

Aboriginal people need health care that incorporates a holistic approach, with services that are flexible, culturally appropriate and supportive. The services of gender specific staff including a doctor, Aboriginal health workers and nurses who are able to communicate well and provide expertise in Aboriginal health inclusive of cultural considerations, respect and dignity, are critical to their acceptance of health care services.<sup>15</sup>

The Aboriginal Well Health checklist has enabled changes within the Aboriginal Health Service in a remote community resulting in improved documentation and holistic assessment and monitoring. The change of focus in health management from a crisis management perspective towards a primary health care approach will, over time, assist this remote community to better manage acute and chronic illness.

This article acknowledges all of the local health providers across Aboriginal and mainstream services and the expertise and commitment of the two visiting medical officers and the women's health educator and their organisations that have worked diligently and collaboratively to improve health services for Aboriginal people in this remote South Australian community. A \$5,000 bursary was provided by

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