

Improving end-of-life care for Indigenous Australians: the role of PEPA

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients (hereafter referred to as Indigenous) with life-limiting conditions have complex needs, experience reduced access to and uptake of treatment, and have lower utilisation of palliative care services than the general population. Lack of understanding of the role of palliative care and poor availability of culturally-safe services has an impact on Indigenous people's end-of-life decisions. The Program of Experience in the Palliative Approach (PEPA) offers a range of flexible training models to better equip health staff with the skill to care for Indigenous patients in a culturally sensitive manner. Since 2007, one focus of PEPA has been on training Indigenous Health Workers (IHW).

Aim: To evaluate Indigenous PEPA and the impact this training has had on the delivery of end-of-life care in a culturally-appropriate manner within Indigenous communities.

A qualitative approach was taken for the evaluation. This involved semi-structured In-depth interviews that occurred in two phases. **Phase One** examined the history and processes of the implementation of Indigenous PEPA. **Phase Two** evaluated the impact of PEPA participation on Indigenous Health Workers (IHWs) and the communities within which they work. Interview content was analysed thematically utilising key focus areas to determine similarities across jurisdictions and whether program objectives were met.

Many factors impacted upon program achievements at the program and the service delivery level. However excellent outcomes were evident where there was support for Indigenous workers to attend training from their line manager. The impact of the training within the service and the community improved when IHWs were well supported by their health team. Many of those interviewed commented on the need for additional education on Advance Care Planning as this assisted patients and their families with end-of-life preparation.

Despite key areas for improvement being identified, Indigenous PEPA provides a flexible, clinical learning experience for Indigenous health professionals enabling them to offer culturally appropriate palliative care to Indigenous Australians across the health continuum. Additionally it emerged that appropriate end-of-life support had a positive impact on the patients and their families as well as on the health team that cared for them.

Recommendations include more direct engagement with clinic and hospital managers to improve their understanding of PEPA and the role IHWs can play in providing palliative care for Indigenous patients; recognise the important role that supervisors play in post-placement mentoring and support; trial longer workshops that include all members of the health team and incorporate a session on Advance Care Planning.