A first for Ferdy’s: our tertiary level research experience on Palm Island

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**Introduction**

Christine is a young Bwgcolman woman, a Palm Islander. Christine is employed by the Townsville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Service. She has been the Youth Worker at Ferdy’s Haven Rehabilitation Aboriginal Corporation on Palm Island since July 2015. Christine’s role as the Youth Worker, is to work with youth from ages 14 to 24 years old. Christine develops programs for early intervention and prevention education to the Palm Island Youth. She also participates in community & stakeholder meetings and community events. Upon appointment to the position of Youth Worker, the research project was already in the development phase. Christine played an integral role with the Bwgcolman Youth Festival in September 2015. The Bwgcolman Youth Festival was run by the young people of Palm Island and was a successful event. Christine also volunteers her time with the SES and PIRFBS (State Emergency Service / Palm Island Rural Fire Brigade Service) on Palm Island. Christine wants to play her part with providing the best service outcome for her community.

Carcia is a Bwgcolman woman a Palm Islander. She is employed by Townsville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Service as the Program Manager of Ferdy’s Haven Alcohol Rehabilitation Aboriginal Corporation after returning home to Palm Island in 2012. She manages a committed team of local Palm Island staff. Almost every person that presents to Ferdy’s Haven for support and care are known to the team which enables Ferdy’s Haven to provide culturally safe care. Carcia is a dedicated Manager with a passion to provide the best outcomes for her Bwgcolman people. Her role also involves participation in community engagement at stakeholder meetings and community events. Carcia is committed to advocating and being involved with community development within Palm Island. Her wish is to see Ferdy’s Haven playing an integral role for Palm Island people in providing holistic services for community wellbeing and advancement. Within this role at the stakeholder level it has exposed Carcia to the idea of a Youth Research Project from attendance at CAMSN meetings.

**Our work space**

Ferdy’s Haven Rehabilitation Aboriginal Corporation, affectionately and locally known as Ferdy’s Haven or Ferdy’s, is situated by the beach on tropical Palm Island, it is a 16 bed self-referral drug and alcohol harm minimisation and treatment residential facility for men and women 18 years and over experiencing detrimental effects of alcohol and drug use. The residential based recovery model is complemented by the Community Wellbeing Service which focuses on the early identification and prevention of alcohol and drug misuse with a range or program sessions to help equip an individual to take back control of their lives. Ferdy’s services were initially established in early 1980 by Palm Island community members based on the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) program. Now, times have changed since the early 1980s, and community social issues have evolved and escalated with the introduction of other forms of drugs and substances resulting in high levels of drug and alcohol consumption that is now affecting young people and their families in the community. The AA program does not meet everybody’s needs and is not consistent with the harm minimisation strategies within the current Australian National Drug Strategy. Hence, tackling the issues has meant that we need to evaluate how we provide our service and we recognise that our programs need to change to meet the needs of the community today. Therapeutic, supportive intervention is now provided to non-residential
participants and residential based participants (and their families) prior to, during and following exit from the residential service.

Since 2013 Ferdy’s Haven has been undergoing capacity building under the auspice arrangement through Townsville Aboriginal and Islanders Health Service (TAIHS). Such work has included the need for an evidence-based model of care with a strong focus on integrating the recovery program into a comprehensive primary health care framework, (community development, health promotion, prevention and early intervention services). This would align with the recommendations within the Palm Island Health Action Plan. It allows for Ferdy’s Haven to broaden its scope to include community-based early intervention activities; more specifically, to address the needs of young people on Palm Island whose lives are impacted by substance misuse.

**Hands on management**

**Young Bwgcolman People, Palm Island**

Palm Island is a young community, the young people of 24 years and under in our population make up over 53% of the community population. As with many other Indigenous communities in Australia, our youth experience high levels of social and emotional distress and their use of drugs, alcohol and other substances is a way of young people coping with their stress. However, we are concerned as community members that this behaviour has to a large degree become normalised. From the outset we want to say that this behaviour is not consistent with Aboriginal culture.

**What does doing research mean to us?**

In early 2014 below TAIHS conducted a community survey which aimed to better understand the impact of alcohol and drugs misuse on Palm Island; including patterns of usage; service gaps, needs and priorities. The key themes to evolve from the survey included the following:

- drug and alcohol use were both overwhelmingly seen as a critical area for concern on Palm Island
- drug taking by young people was the main age group of concern. The most frequently used substance was reported to be sniffing petrol, followed by taking cannabis (Yandi), sniffing glue, paint and deodorant

Information from this community survey has assisted in the development and review of the Ferdy’s Haven service model. From there we gained our first insight into the importance of community participation which is essential given we are a community controlled health organisation.

To further strengthen the service model the need for evidence based research has become very important and so we became research partners with James Cook University in 2015.

**Palm Island peer research**

Young people doing research with young people and finding out the issues is really important for our service delivery and capacity building Ferdy’s services to meet the community’s need. Working on Palm Island has many challenges in delivering an effective drug and alcohol harm minimisation and treatment program. We live and work in the community and have firsthand experience of the cost of drug and alcohol misuse to our families and to the wider Palm Island community. We have been
talking about this issue for a long time (decades), and we have seen mixed results where such programs have been implemented in other Indigenous communities throughout Australia who have share experiences in their youth population.

As a service provider we realise that we needed to know more and to do this we had to engage with Palm Island youth on different level from a position of being family and drug and alcohol worker. Sometimes approaching a situation differently yields a new perspective on the issue. We already recognised the problem, and we needed to get the information from the young people themselves, but we also wanted the young people to think about their issues and be part of driving this process.

When we were approached by Dr Geia from James Cook University about being a partner in a youth study on Palm Island we had no hesitation in accepting the invitation. This is the first time that Ferdy’s Haven has been involved with a formal research process in the last decade. This is an important process which included Ferdy’s from the beginning; the youth workers were trained as research assistants and were involved in developing the survey tool through to data analysis in the project.

How was the experience

Our experience has been positive—the interim findings of the research have provided more insight into the lives of the young people and their needs. We are not able to reveal more at present until the data analysis is complete and the report is completed.

However, we can say that the research process has been a steep learning curve for Ferdy’s staff but we see this as having potential to building a better service for our community.

The Research Assistants had to brainstorm places to setup & the best times of the day to conduct the surveys. Information sheets were provided to give youth an idea what it was about and to help assist them to participate or not in the survey.

Places we setup were the most common areas for Youth hangout. It was easy to do because we know the Youth and they knew us and felt comfortable. But we couldn’t go to the PCYC or Schools, inside homes or other Services. It had to be done in public areas. We engaged youth by either sitting or walking around and approaching Youth. Even while sitting Youth walked over and asked what we were doing and most times they participated after receiving information.

We offered to assist and help read the questions but most were okay while others had some difficulty reading, especially the questions about Alcohol & Drugs. If we observed that a survey participant appeared to have a mental health issue/disability then we had to perform the survey slowly to make sure they understood, repeating questions over with them. It was great to see how many youth participated. We enjoyed working with James Cook University staff particularly with developing the questions as we were able to word them appropriate to how community people talk (Palm Island slang). We noticed this got reactions from participants as they could relate to the wording. Having the iPads was fun and interactive for the youth especially with knowing that most youth today are technology savvy. Once we began the surveys information became word of mouth and it did not take much more effort to promote or engage youth, they approached us. It was nice to see how many people participated at the end and realising how much information we get out of conducting research; it was interesting when we ran reports to see how questions related to each other and we began to understand and appreciate the role research plays to service delivery.
Youth don’t know their culture and particularly their languages. There were some youth who were not interested in getting to know their culture at all.

It was interesting to see that as youth were completing the survey they were also giving verbal feedback and said the research project was a good idea for Palm Island. They were interested in the idea of a Youth Hub and making changes to community. The experience was interactive and provided us with on the spot feedback as to how comfortable they were with the experience.

**What was good and not so good about it?**

As young local Bwgcolman people working with other young people it has allowed for a supportive environment for our young people to be engaging. *We speak the same language, we understand one another.* Having the target group being engaged by their own peers has made it more comfortable for them. It’s been real effective and there was enthusiasm by them to put in the time and the effort. *We were able to explain to our peer group that this research material will be a resource for our future.*

**What would be some of the changes?**

We feel that more training and more knowledge prior to going out into community would have been beneficial to us as we were not too confident to walk up to some Youth.

The information gathering could have been more proactive including the following:

- going after hours when the youth are more active to capture the perspective of those disengaged youth when they are more active in the public areas of the community

- making it more appealing in the sense where its user friendly having pictures to get the point across of the question not just reading out a whole bunch of questions and hoping they understand what is being asked.

**How do we see it helping Ferdy’s services?**

Ferdy’s has had a more narrowed approach to service delivery as explained earlier, being founded on a residential rehabilitation model for people aged 18 years and over. On Palm Island to our knowledge there has only ever been the ATODS service that provides for youth to access and the Child Mental Health service. We feel we have a better understanding of what drugs the youth are accessing, how easy it is to access, and what effects it has on the community as a whole.

Our experience is enabling us to further develop our current program content to be more suitable to youth. It is enabling us to know where to start with young people such as alcohol and drug awareness, being aware of the social issues at home, and if there are any effects from peer pressure.

Since the completion of the survey data gathering Ferdy’s Haven staff as community people living and working in community are more aware of youth drinking and drug use. Listening to the youth talk about the extent of the alcohol and drug abuse in community has been shocking and has made us angry.

As workers at Ferdy’s Haven working with clients primarily 18 years and over we feel there is a strong need to work more closely with the youth. Ferdy’s Haven is staffed by local Palm Island people. We
were born and/or raised on the Island from birth, our connection to this community can be traced back three and four generations. As local Palm Island people we understand the history and struggles that our community has endured, some positive and some negative. Our community is unique in that it comprises of descendants of over 40 different tribal groups.

Seeing the amount of youth misusing alcohol and drugs below the age of 18 is very concerning, particularly with wondering where do they go for help? There are parents approaching us afterhours for support in desperation. Is there a service gap on Pam Island? What do we do about it? Is there a need for us to highlight domestic/family violence that occurs as a result of alcohol/drugs? Young people are sleeping rough or at other people’s places because someone is sleeping in their bed at their home? Why is this happening?

What is the true impact of the extended two and three day long binge drinking parties that with poly drug use occurring? Our youth are misusing alcohol and drugs without knowing what the effects have on their developing bodies and those around them. How do we let them know that it is not right?

There are known School dropouts. How do we capture and re-engage them back to education and is disengagement from school a contributing factor to the uptake of alcohol and drugs? Kids who complete year 12 return to the community and have already commenced drinking and partying. They have completed their schooling away from the Island but have come back and entered a culture of binge drinking that is normalized here on Palm Island.

Being involved in the survey process has opened the eyes of all Ferdy’s Haven staff to look past our own target group within the residential centre. An internal recommendation from Ferdy’s Haven staff is that our Service Model needs to continue to be developed and grow to meet the needs of young people in the Palm Island community. We need to focus on the youth and younger children and start early and allow them to have a chance of learning for the rest of their life, from this we hope that there will be a better success rate and reduced levels misusing harmful substances.

After the survey—looking to the future

We would like to see more research conducted on Palm Island in the future. It is important to get local people involved and see what they want to see in the community.

Ferdy’s Haven is already engaged in the development of our service model as a direct result of being involved in the research project. We have successfully been awarded funding to conduct a project awarded by Northern Queensland PHN. The project will aim to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth Health using a holistic framework.

Advice to others wanting to perform research in Indigenous communities

As local people we feel it is important that you make sure the questions suit the participants and is easy to understand (awareness of reading difficulties). Use local people to help conduct the research, they must be involved. Be sure to gain knowledge of the history and current issues in community such. Become aware of any local cultural protocols by using local cultural mentors. Promotion is important to make the community aware of what is going on.

Recommendation

That research capacity building is provided for grass roots service providers in an Indigenous context.
Reference


Presenters

Carcia Nallajar is a member of the Bwgcolman people of her home Palm Island and a descendant of the Mirraway, Karrawa and Kuku Yalanji nations of North Queensland. Carcia is the Program Manager of Ferdy’s Haven Alcohol Rehabilitation Aboriginal Corporation on Palm Island, a sixteen-bed Aboriginal community controlled health residential facility for adult men and women. As Program Manager, Carcia manages a committed team of local Palm Island staff. Almost every person that presents to Ferdy’s Haven for support and care are known to the team, which enables Ferdy’s Haven to provide culturally safe care. Carcia is a dedicated manager with a passion to provide the best outcomes for her Bwgcolman people. Her role also involves participation in community engagement at stakeholder meetings and community events. Carcia holds a Certificate IV in Mental Health (AOD) and a Diploma in Management and has also worked for State and Commonwealth Departments in Queensland and the ACT, private companies and non-profit organisations.

Christine Cannon is the descendant of the Girramay and Yindji ancestors. She was born and raised on Palm Island. Christine graduated from grade 12 at Bwgcolman Community School, located on Palm Island, with a QCE (Queensland Certificate of Education) and she is currently doing her Cert III in Community Service (Aged Care). Christine is employed by the Townsville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Service. Christine is the Youth Worker at Ferdy’s Haven Rehabilitation Aboriginal Corporation on Palm Island. Ferdy’s Haven is a 16-bed residential facility for both men and women 18 years and over with alcohol and drug issues. Christine’s role as the Youth Worker, is to work with youth from ages 14 to 24 years old. Christine develops programs for early intervention and prevention education to the Palm Island youth and wider community. She also participates in community and stakeholder meetings and community events. Christine also volunteers her time with the SES and PIRFBS (State Emergency Service/Palm Island Rural Fire Brigade Service) on Palm Island. Christine wants to play her part with providing the best service outcome for her community.