Putting connection to culture at the centre of health for Aboriginal mothers and babies—a way forward

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The central premise of this work is the need to prioritise the voices of older Yolgnu women who call for strong cultural connection as setting the scene for healthy women, mothers and their babies from remote Aboriginal communities. Improved attendance at cultural women’s health activities gives rise to the best opportunity for ensuring long term healthy outcomes in the eyes of these senior women.

Western initiatives in health care have led to significant improvements in the care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers and their babies particularly for those that reside in remote locations. However, in some remote and very remote locations and across a range of health indicators the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples continues to widen. This is most evident in the space that concerns the care of young mothers and their babies. An eclectic mix of poor social determinants, isolation, poor life style choices, disempowered leadership and control, lack of access, poor resource allocation, and non-affordable and culturally inappropriate health care has meant that the struggle to close the gap against a tide of chronic illness has left both health policy makers and Aboriginal people perplexed and despondent about the future health of generations to come.

It is against this backdrop that it is time to give voice to a unique strategy suggested by Yolgnu women of Milingimbi in the remote East Arnhem region. They believe they can make a real contribution to closing the gap by building into existing antenatal care programs the importance of attendance to women’s health and women’s law activities within their community. If improvements in antenatal care and improvements in the care of women generally are attained, then there is a greater chance of healthier babies born to these women and greater focus of the caring and nurturing role to their infants. This care involves the business of encouraging and promoting through existing health services the importance of spiritual and cultural connection in women’s health. It is something that can only be provided by the older women of the community and within their own community. They want to be a part of health care delivery and see their role in providing cultural and spiritual care as equal to western antenatal care practices that already exist.