A new approach to psychological support for Aboriginal clients with complex needs

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Introduction

The Fresh Tracks project provides care coordination and assistance for clients who have a chronic disease, are at risk of chronic diseases and/or with complex psychosocial needs, are without support networks or need assistance to navigate the health service system. Fresh Tracks is a Koolin Balit-funded project focused on fostering holistic social and emotional wellbeing through care coordination and assistance. ‘Fishing for Answers’ a sub-project stemming from the Fresh Tracks project has been presented to the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee, has ongoing support from the Victorian South West Regional Department of Justice and has received a leadership and innovation award from the Victorian Koori Community Justice Awards.

The Fresh Tracks project is a Social Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) program developed at the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative in Geelong, Victoria. The project has been running since 2014 and continues to operate successfully through Wathaurong health services based at the Co-operative. The Fresh Track project aims to provide an assertive outreach model of care coordination to clients who are identified to have significant issues that impact on their ability to access and engage in services both at Wathaurong and in the mainstream community. Clients are identified to have or be at risk of developing chronic disease and / or deteriorating mental health needs. Fresh Tracks has provided extremely positive outcomes for participants, their communities and in fostering partnerships with local health, community and justice organisations.

Background and local context

Wathaurong’s catchment area includes the City of Greater Geelong, Surf Coast Shire, Colac Otway Shire and Queenscliff. Based on ABS 2011 census data, the estimated Aboriginal population for the Barwon South West (BSW) Region was 3,531 with the total number of Aboriginal people in Wathaurong’s catchment area of Greater Geelong being 1,789 people.1

The Fresh Tracks project involves Wathaurong’s Health Services team which includes primary health care, general practitioners, allied health services, Koori Maternity Services, alcohol and other drugs services and the ‘Bringing them Home’ team. Visiting specialists and practitioners who come from surrounding health and community services in the region can also be involved. Time is spent as part of the project at Wurdi Youang which has cultural significance to the local people and allows them to re-connect with land and culture whilst working through social and emotional issues.

Wurdi Youang at Little River near the foot of the You Yangs National Park is a property that Wathaurong has title to, and stewardship of. It is situated approximately 20kms from the organisation’s main site and is a place of important natural and cultural heritage to the local people. Wathaurong Health Service aims to provide holistic and culturally secure service responses to meet the specific needs of local Aboriginal communities through assistance and access to a wide range of community, family and health services. Services are provided for Aboriginal families living in or in transit through Wathaurong’s traditional boundaries.
Rationale for the Fresh Tracks project

Anecdotally, it is understood that the BSW region is home to one of the largest Stolen Generation populations in Australia evidenced by the number of institutions and orphanages that were historically in the region. This is relevant to the development of the Fresh Tracks project as issues of psychological distress in the community were identified by Wathaurong.

As the 1997 Bringing Them Home report stated: ‘Most significantly the actions of the past resonate in the present and will continue to do so in the future. The laws, policies and practices which separated Indigenous children from their families have contributed directly to the alienation of Indigenous societies today...For individuals, their removal as children and the abuse they experienced at the hands of the authorities or their delegates have permanently scarred their lives. The harm continues in later generations, affecting their children and grandchildren’.2

Staff at Wathaurong identified an increased presentation of mental health issues, particularly in men who experienced health issues inherently linked to issues of trauma. Consequently, the need for culturally competent psychological counselling was identified, and an assertive outreach care coordination model was established to reach these clients.

Chronic disease and psychological distress

Compared with non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous Australians are more likely to have chronic conditions and experience an earlier onset for many of these conditions. The most common long-term health conditions among Indigenous Australians include: respiratory diseases; cardiovascular diseases; diabetes; chronic kidney disease; cancers; musculoskeletal diseases; and ear and hearing problems.3

Role of the community in the development of the Fresh Tracks project

As a community-controlled organisation providing health services, there is a clear understanding within Wathaurong of the need to provide holistic psychological support services. Prior to the establishment of the Fresh Tracks project, Wathaurong General Practitioners had identified increased presentations of mental health issues. The Health Service team and Manager identified concerns, particularly for men experiencing health issues inherently linked to issues of trauma, with men in this group often disconnecting, or are at risk of disconnecting, from community and from families. Health problems often further complicated mental health issues through factors such as unemployment, financial hardship, food insecurity or insecure housing. Family health and relationships are often also impacted through the flow-on effects of men’s psychological distress which can affect children, partners and other family members.

Establishment of the Fresh Tracks Program

Victorian Koolin Balit funding provided the opportunity for Wathaurong to create a new and complementary health service to address the social and emotional wellbeing needs of the community. The service would include dedicated counselling resources paired with a model of assertive outreach care coordination.

The Fresh Tracks program was developed with consideration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural concepts of health, social and emotional wellbeing and mental health as being a broad and culturally bound concept. The Social Health Reference Group4 for the National Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander Health Council and National Mental Health Working Group defined the concept in the following way:

“social and emotional wellbeing is broader than an illness or clinical perspective and recognises the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community, and how these affect the individual. Social and emotional wellbeing problems cover a broad range of problems that can result from unresolved grief and loss, trauma and abuse, domestic violence, removal from family, substance misuse, family breakdown, cultural dislocation, racism and discrimination, and social disadvantage”.

The Fresh Tracks program aligns with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander holistic views of health as encompassing mental and physical health, cultural and spiritual health. Land, family and spirituality are central to wellbeing. Self-determination is also central to the provision of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services to allow culturally valid understandings to help shape the provision of services, and guide assessment, care and management of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s health and mental health in particular.

* This model was developed by AIPA members Clinton Schultz, Amanda Hart, Tania Jones, Vickie Hovane & Graham Gee in collaboration with Kerrie Kelly AIPA Cultural Competence Resource Development Officer.
Developing an assertive outreach model

Fresh Tracks implemented an ‘assertive outreach’ model of care. This approach is often useful for clients with a high degree of complex needs coupled with lower rates of attending clinical care. The key features of assertive outreach is that services can be provided in the community, in a client’s home or a public setting, rather than restricted to a clinical office. The practitioner will assertively follow up the client such as ensuring they attend an appointment to prevent the client ‘falling through the cracks’ or becoming lost in the system. This requires professional skills and judgement from the practitioner to achieve a balance between not neglecting the client, nor over-riding the client’s wishes. Assertive outreach is frequently used in sectors such as mental health, housing and alcohol and other drugs.

Program goals

The initial goal for the Fresh Tracks program was to establish an assertive outreach model of care coordination to provide holistic care to the Wathaurong community and their families. However, program goals have evolved over time and with evaluation of the program. Current goals of the program are to:

1. facilitate connectedness according SEWB principles to reduce chronic disease in Aboriginal people
2. provide holistic care in a person’s own environment
3. build culturally responsive services and to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal patients
4. advocate for the cultural competence of mainstream health providers where referral is necessary
5. provide community care for people who have chronic disease.

An overview of the Fresh Tracks program

Resourcing: The Fresh Tracks coordinator is a qualified psychologist who works 0.6 EFT to coordinate the program. The coordinator is currently the only person employed to deliver the program with a tight budget which covers salary, administration, infrastructure costs and some client expenses. Resourcing for this program has been challenging for the sole practitioner, but continued program reach and positive evaluation findings will be used to seek further resourcing in the future.

Target group and eligibility: People at risk of chronic disease, and/or with complex psychosocial needs and/or without support networks and/or difficult to engage, due to psychosocial issues that impact on health service utilisation for themselves and their families. Priority is given to those most at risk in terms of their social, emotional and psychological wellbeing and/or physical health needs.

Approach: Assertive outreach case coordination model that is client centred to improve service utilisation and improve client’s physical, psychological and social health. Clear goals are developed with each client followed by the coordinator assertively following up with clients to ensure they continue engaging with the program and other health services. A Social Emotional Wellbeing Framework is used to ensure cultural, social and political determinants of health and taken into consideration during service delivery.
**Referrals:** Referrals are received from Wathaurong Community, Health and family programs Health and community service providers, community members or self-referrals.

**Intake:** Following discussion with referrer the coordinator conducts an intake assessment within one working week from receipt of the referral.

**Waiting list:** There is currently no waiting list

**Assessment:** The coordinator conducts an assessment of each client using the Victorian Service Coordination Tool Template (SCTT, 2012)\(^7\) to determine service needs and referral requirements.

**Planning:** Includes deciding the frequency of consultations between the coordinator and each client.

**How the Fresh Tracks program is delivered**

**Psychological counselling:** The number of counselling sessions is determined by client need; engagement and achievement of care plan goals. Sessions vary from single sessions to multiple sessions (for clients with multiple complex needs).

**Complex care coordination:** Care is coordinated to support clients with complex care needs who need assistance to navigate the service system due to psychosocial issues. Services may be delivered on-site, on country (for example at Wurdi Youang) or in the community, as part of the program’s assertive outreach model.

**Review:** Progress towards care plan goals are reviewed every 3 months.

**Closure:** ‘Episodes of care’ are closed when clients have achieved their care plan goals following review with the coordinator. Episodes of care are closed for clients unable to be contacted following multiple attempts after 3 weeks.

**Documentation:** Each session is documented using the Best Practice Patient Information Recall System (PIRS).

**Clinical measures:** Psychological distress is measured with the Kessler 10-Psychological Distress Scale.\(^8\)

**Referral partners and care coordination**

Fresh Tracks clients are frequently involved in other Wathaurong health or community services or programs including men’s or women’s programs, alcohol and other drug counselling, housing support, medical services with general practitioners or from visiting consultants, such as the Barwon Health Psychiatric Registrar.

With the client’s consent, information is shared across these programs and services through the Patient Information Recall System and through internal consultations. External referrals are received from local health and community service providers. Referrals are also received from other local services such as Bethany which provides a range of community and family services, including housing support and intensive case management support, the Barwon Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) and the Department of Justice, Community Corrections.
Client issues

Clients present with a broad range of diagnosed disorders and conditions including:

Acquired Brain Injury, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bi-polar disorder, chronic fatigue, clinical depression, intellectual disability, personality disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, psychosis and substance related disorders.

Chronic conditions include: chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cystic fibrosis, dementia diabetes, malignancy, morbid obesity, osteoarthritis, renal disease, vascular disease. Clients may also be experiencing a range of complex psychosocial issues including; homelessness, chaotic lifestyles, experience as victim or perpetrator of violence or abuse, either currently or as a childhood experience, family or domestic violence, loneliness, issues relating to childhood in care, child protection issues, drug and alcohol issues, financial issues, gambling issues, legal issues, poor health literacy, poor literacy, lack of transport, isolation and school refusal/truancy.

Project outcomes

Graph 1  Gender distribution and client engagement over reporting periods

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Project reach and engagement: Since 2014, the Fresh Tracks program has assisted 107 individual clients. People leave and return to the program, and when they return they are again counted as a new active client hence, the total number of active clients (182) is greater than the number of individuals (107). The number of active clients has grown significantly over each six-month period. The data also shows more men engaged in the program in the first and most recent reporting periods, but relatively even numbers of women and men engaged in the program overall. In terms of individuals, the program has engaged with 55 men (51.5%) and 52 women (48.5%).
Clients of the program broadly comprise three groups: those who engage briefly, those who engage for a short to medium term period, and those with complex conditions and needs, who engage more intensively and over a long term.

Graph 3  Demographic reach
The largest age group engaged with the program is the 20-29 years old cohort who comprise one quarter of all clients. The smallest age group is the 40-49 years old group, who comprise 12% of all clients. Most noticeable in the results however is the spread across all age cohorts. Those aged between 20 to 39 years make up almost half of the total clients.

New partnerships—’Fishing for Answers’

Fishing for Answers is an innovative project that has been developed from the Fresh Tracks program to support clients identified as displaying significant stressors including mental health and anger issues who are on Community Corrections Orders (CCOs) under the Department of Justice. Fishing for answers aims to reduce reoffending, improve communication skills, manage mental health issues and develop strategies to manage anger.

While completing tasks associated with their CCOs such as tree planting, weed spraying and other land management activities, participants are given the opportunity to have a psychologist work individually alongside them or to join the psychologist in river bank reflection on the property near Lara (Wurdi Youang). These activities recognize the importance of having meaningful, transformative conversation in a non-clinical culturally safe setting. Conversations are encouraged between the psychologist and the participant with use of the SEWB ‘chatterbox” which supports counselling. Participants are in engaged in conversations they might not normally have around their connectedness to community, family, culture and their overall health and wellbeing through the use of the chatterbox. This origami-style paper tool was developed with eight hidden panels for participants to reveal to facilitate different conversations.

Fishing for Answers overview

Ten Fishing for Answers sessions were conducted at the Wurdi Youang property at Little River. Some of the participants that were engaged in the project were not able to attend every session due to medical and legal appointments but were given a “catch up” session the following week.

Materials provided: Materials provided included a portfolio the “Getting Along and Keeping Cool” Behaviour Change/ Anger Management booklet and worksheets used with permission from the Centre for Clinical Interventions. A cultural identity and issues guide worksheet was also provided to each participant.

Participants: Participants included seven men aged between 20 and 40 years of age with an average age of 31 year.

• Participant 1—3yrs History of Depression, past alcohol abuse
• Participant 2—18mth History of Depression
• Participant 3—12mth History of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, 5yr history of depression, alcohol abuse, substance misuse, dyslexia
• Participant 4—15yr History of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, substance abuse, epilepsy secondary to arteriovenous malformation, acquired brain injury (ABI)
• Participant 5—Acquired Brain Injury, 15yr history of substance abuse
• Participant 6—Acquired Brain Injury, substance abuse, 5 year history of anxiety disorder
• Participant 7—4 year history of Depression, substance misuse, poor literacy.

Outcomes and impact evaluation of Fishing for Answers

Fishing for Answers has been presented to the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee, has ongoing support from the Regional Department of Justice and has received a leadership and innovation award from the Victorian Koori Community Justice Awards.

Feedback from clients provides evidence of the positive impact the project has had on participants’ health and wellbeing. When asked “what were the benefits in having a psychologist working alongside you while you complete your Community Based Order?” participants responded:

“It’s excellent! It is a convenient way to learn how to deal with physical and mental health issues. The pressure cooker concept has helped me to manage my anger better”. Participant 1

“There are massive benefits. I am able to remain in culture and in my community while I learn strategies to manage my anger and other problems. You know it’s good because it feels good. My mental health has improved”. Participant 2

“In my case, I don’t want to be there—I feel I have been dealt a harsh blow by the courts. It’s good to have someone to talk to. It’s good to have support. I’m not sure if I would be as committed to making the changes that I am without that support”. Participant 3

“It’s perfect—it’s made a massive difference in my life. Going out to Wurdi Youang has changed me immensely! When I am out there I feel relaxed.” Participant 4

“I have learnt things that help my relationship—I think partners would benefit from going out there as well”. Participant 5

Unavailable for comment. Participant 6

“I think it is a great idea because out there (Wurdi Youang) it is easier to open up to someone because of the environment. I have liked learning ways to manage anger and communicate with my partner”. Participant 7

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale scores were measured prior to implementing the Fishing for Answers consultations and after consultations showing marked improvement of levels of distress after attending Fishing for Answer sessions:
K10s | Past score | Following course
---|---|---
Participant 1 | 44 | 34
Participant 2 | 26 | 18
Participant 3 | 44 | 34
Participant 4 | 40 | 37
Participant 5 | 28 | 18
Participant 6 | 33 | withdrew due to breach of parole
Participant 7 | 31 | 30

Through the Fishing for Answers arm of the Fresh Tracks Project a total of 52 referrals were made to health and community services and other organisations including: Psychiatry—Wathaurong Health Service (3); Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (3); General Practitioner (7); Indigenous Tenants at Risk (Housing) (3); Neuropsychology (ARBIAS) (2); Support Letters Magistrates Court (4); Financial Counselling (2); Family Dispute Centre (3); Dental (3); Food Bank (6); Employment Consultant (6); Gordon TAFE Education Consultant (6); and Alcohol and Other Drug Counselling (4).

**Fresh Tracks Project learnings/successes**

- Having one person coordinate all health and service needs can support vulnerable clients
- The program supports those clients who do not ‘fit’ neatly into other services
- The SEWB foundation allows root causes to be addressed
- Fresh Tracks works with other Wathaurong services to provide ‘wrap-around’ services
- Fresh Tracks makes connections between clients, services and organisations
- Fishing for Answers encourages behaviour modification, improves health and well-being and mobilises participants to not re-offend
• Important partnerships can be foster through care coordination and working in partnership

Project challenges

• Having to respond to clients with highly complex needs spanning medical and psychosocial domains who require long-term intensive
• Not having a female counsellor to provide gender-specific counselling for ‘women’s business’
• Geographic challenges
• Insufficient protected time for the psychologist to provide psychological assessment reports to courts or the Department of Justice
• Sole practitioner model—the psychologist is at risk of burn out, professional isolation and exposure to violence without other staff present
• High demand for the program and need to be responsive 24/7
• Sustainability of the program due to reliance on leadership from a sole practitioner—psychologist/program coordinator

Conclusion

The Fresh Tracks approach of culturally informed, assertive outreach care coordination support based in an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, has demonstrated significant benefits for clients’ health and wellbeing, for the organisation and for the local service system.

References

Presenter

Paul Thornton was born in the Australian Capital Territory and raised in Ballarat, Victoria. He currently lives in Geelong, Victoria. Paul has worked in many areas helping people as a psychologist: the Central Highlands Education Department, Ballarat Specialist School, Ewing House School for the Deaf, Centacare working with young people who are at risk of developing psychosis, Grampians Psychiatric Services as a community case manager, Barwon Health Hospital Admission Risk Program Complex Needs Care Coordinator, Private Psychology and now at Wathaurong Health Service. He is an AHPRA registered psychologist and psychologist supervisor and has worked with both the Australian Psychological Society and Victorian Department of Health and Human Services in determining best practice guidelines for management of clients with complex psychosocial needs. He has worked at Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative since July of 2010 in the clinical role as a psychologist. Additionally he has been employed as the Fresh Tracks Project Coordinator since July of 2014. During this time he continued to develop his understanding of Aboriginal culture and the influence culture has on health. An objective of Paul’s current role as Fresh Tracks Project Coordinator is to provide an assertive outreach model of care to the Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative’s community. Clients are identified to have significant issues that impact on their ability to access and engage in services both at Wathaurong and in the mainstream community. Clients are identified to have or be at risk of developing chronic disease and/or deteriorating mental health needs.