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## Better together: working and growing together will enhance Aboriginal careers in health

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Expanding and strengthening the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professional workforce is recognised as crucial for improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A key challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health managers in both the mainstream and community-controlled health sectors is the recruitment, support, development and retention of a suitably skilled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professional workforce to meet local community needs.

The Career Pathways Project is an Aboriginal-led national research project that is funded by the Lowitja Institute. In line with the conference theme of 'better together', this national project came about through the merging of two separate, but highly complementary proposals that the Lowitja Institute received as a result of a call for research into 'Career Pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Professionals'. At the request of the Lowitja Institute, these two competitive submissions from NSW and the NT were combined into a single comprehensive, national project.

Overall, the project is designed to provide insight and guidance to enhance the capacity of the health system to retain and support the development and careers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the health workforce. The mixed methods study has several components and many partners, including Bila Muuji Aboriginal Corporation Health Service, Maari Ma Health, Western NSW Local Health District, South West Sydney Local Health District, Awabakal Medical Service, Western Sydney University, UNSW Sydney, Human Capital Alliance and AMSANT.

In western NSW, we have conducted a series of yarning circles with Aboriginal health staff and their managers at both Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) and mainstream health services. The aim of the yarning circles was to collect ground-level data across different locations, spanning regional, rural and remote regions of western NSW. This allowed us to explore in depth the factors impacting on career trajectories whilst using a solutions-focus to generate a range of potential strategies for enhancing career pathways. Comparisons across organisation type and location (regional/rural/remote) provided a deeper understanding of how these factors influence the experiences of Aboriginal health staff.

In total, 20 yarning circles were held across 10 sites in western NSW, and 54 Aboriginal health staff and 28 managers participated. We learned how Aboriginal health staff make an important and unique contribution to health services. They bring valuable (and often under-valued) cultural expertise and community connections as well as an array of administrative, technical and professional skills and personal attributes. Holistic healthcare and a focus on the 'we' in wellness comes naturally for them in the ways they work for their communities.

What they bring that's in them. We talk about culture, it's not the culture of music, art, dance, skin colour. It's the culture of what they know, what they've been born with, what they do every day, what they see in their communities and their neighbourhoods, then they apply it to practice. They have that knowledge and it's not trained. It's ingrained in them. (Manager, ACCHO)

Aboriginal staff and their managers identified a number of key success factors for supporting career development. Central to these are teamwork and support. Participants noted that other enablers such as training were of little use if they were offered in the absence of a good support structure. Participants described working together and growing together with their Aboriginal colleagues (peer support) as fostering a workplace environment that supports them to thrive. Managerial and organisational support, along with family and community support, are also critical. These networks of support help foster resilience to cope with the physical, emotional and spiritual demands of training and working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

That's where our biggest support comes from. That's one of the skills we have: supporting each other. (Staff, mainstream)

You have to build the frameworks that support people before you start ... training. Stop setting them up to fail and make sure that everything is in place before you ... start recruiting. (Manager, mainstream)

You know, for those people that are having to go away for education or even just within work environments... Just encouragement and having somebody that just comes along beside you and gives you that support. (Manager, ACCHO)

These findings mirror the approach we took to implementing this project both within the research team and in the data collection methods. Working together as a team, we have built research capacity building into every stage of the project. This learning and supporting has been truly two-way, with non-academic team members being deeply involved in every stage of the research process, including data collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting. In turn, the university team members have built their capacity to conduct culturally respectful and inclusive research guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research team members. The use of yarning circles as the primary data collection approach was a considered choice amongst the team. The yarning circle environment allows participants to support each other through the process of participation providing a safe environment for participants to contribute to the research. The benefit of this to the research is that the data collected is often richer and deeper, as participants build on one another's ideas and contributions during the yarn. The participants described the yarning circle as being a very positive and rewarding experience for them. Through the sharing of stories in the yarning circle, they learned things about their colleagues that they hadn't known before. They also learnt about research methods, as many didn't know that a yarning circle could be used as a data collection approach, and many said they left the yarning circle with a more positive view of research.

In short, providing well-supported and varied opportunities to work together and grow together should be considered essential to enhancing career pathways of Aboriginal health professionals, which in turn will contribute to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal communities. It truly is better together.

## Presenter

**Pam Renata** is executive assistant to Phil Naden, CEO Bila Muuji Aboriginal Corporation Health Service, which comprises Aboriginal Community Controlled Medical Services from Brewarrina, Bourke, Coomealla, Coonamble, Dubbo, Forbes, Orange and Walgett. Bila Muuji actively address health inequality in each of their local communities. Bila Muuji's approach is to 'provide health services addressing not just the physical well-being of the individual but also the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community'. Pam coordinates, leads, and manages Bila Muuji research projects. With a background working in immigration, health and mental health, Pam has two First Nation Maori sons and as a result has a keen interest in first nation's people's health and wellbeing issues. As a research assistant on the National Career Pathways Project, Pam has travelled extensively through NSW assisting with the management of the project, working collaboratively with the NSW team, Associate Professor Ilse Blignault, Senior Lecturer Rural Health and Research, Jannine Bailey of Western Sydney University, and Bila Muuji CEO Phil Naden. Pam is an energetic community member taking a pro-active role in improving the health outcomes in her Central West community.