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‘Never too far’: the importance of return to country and the value of working together with rural and remote Indigenous communities

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The provision of holistic family centred healthcare for young people and their families is paramount for all healthcare users inclusive of those living in rural, remote and Indigenous communities.

The Quality of Care Collaborative Australia Project (QuoCCA), aims to build capacity in the provision of paediatric palliative care in identified communities. The QuoCCA project consists of a time sensitive, “Pop up” model of care. This patient led model of care aims to build and enhance the local healthcare communities existing knowledge and strengths. This is achieved through time specific, care focused and specialised sustainable education sessions surrounding paediatric palliative care and advanced care planning. This education makes it possible for specialist teams to come together with local teams to support the child/young person and family receiving palliative care whose final wish consists of returning to rural home towns or to country.

For Indigenous Australians, the connection to their country is intrinsic to their identity. The time before and following death is subject to many important customary practices that are sacred to Indigenous Australians. Returning to country and their family of origin for the final stages of life holds considerable significance due to the Indigenous connection to homelands. For Indigenous Australians, this cultural connection can be challenged when required to receive specialised care at tertiary healthcare settings in major cities. This means the support required for these Indigenous families is specific and specialised. When Indigenous families are faced with no further treatment options for their child, returning to country is not only paramount for the child and immediate family, but for the entire Indigenous and rural community.

This presentation will focus on the case of a young Indigenous baby with a life limiting condition whose parental instinct and need to return to country and the arms of their mob initiated a supportive response through the QuoCCA project. This response ensured that the family returned to country in a timely manner. Support is essential for any person in the final stages of life and for Indigenous Australians, this support is limited and profoundly affected if they are not near their Indigenous country. For this family, the support from elders was paramount in their experience of their baby’s short life and her death. The community and healthcare workers were empowered through specialist education and support, to ensure that the end of life for this baby occurred in a way that was supportive, sustainable and respectful of her culture and spiritual needs.

Arrival to her homelands by the Retrieval team brought with it the cultural practice of sorry business. Her mob met her and her family, they shared in their grief and ensured that this baby and her family were never alone. In passing, they ensured that her spirit was sent along its journey by participating in the sacred tribal practices of her mob as well as the clinical medical process for care of this baby were met in a sensitive manner.

Holistic healthcare for Indigenous Australians should always consider their traditional beliefs no matter the age, situation, perceived challenges or distance to reach their traditional country.

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Presenters

Karen Joy is a clinical nurse with 15 years' experience in paediatric intensive care, Community Home ventilation and paediatric palliative care. Karen has completed a Masters of Social Work complementing her nursing degree and is currently completing a Masters of Palliative Care. Karen holds a strong interest in religions of the world and Indigenous culture.

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