Learnings from the Santa Teresa social and emotional wellbeing program

Timothy A Carey1, Chris Hawke2, Chris Wallace2, Mia Mulladad2
1Centre for Remote Health, Flinders University, 2Central Australian Aboriginal Congress

Aim: The aim of this project was to investigate the experiences of people involved in the development and delivery of the Santa Teresa Social and Emotional Wellbeing Program. Santa Teresa is a remote Aboriginal community that is relatively resource poor with a high prevalence of mental health problems. The knowledge generated from this project would help to improve the program locally, as well as provide important lessons for policy makers and service managers more generally regarding culturally appropriate, fit for purpose, sustainable programs.

Methods: A total of 21 people with different involvement in the program—such as program operators, program participants, and program referrers—were interviewed for the study. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the interview transcripts.

Relevance: Indigenous Australians are twice as likely as non-Indigenous Australians to report high or very high levels of psychological distress. It is important that attempts to address the social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous Australians are relevant and appropriate to local contexts.

Santa Teresa is an Aboriginal community of more than 500 people that is located approximately 80 kilometres south-east of Alice Springs. In response to significant and serious events in the community, such as suicides and relationship violence, a social and emotional wellbeing program was developed. After the program had been running for four years, an independent evaluation was initiated to understand what people’s experience of the program in the community had been.

Results: Two major themes and nine sub-themes were developed from the interview transcripts. The first major theme was called ‘the big picture’ and it had the sub-themes: getting started; organisational factors; funding; the future; and operational problems. The second major theme was called ‘on the ground’ and it had the sub-themes: personal struggles; program activities; measuring outcomes; and results. Generally, the program had been experienced positively in the community; however, important lessons emerged during the implementation of the program.

Conclusions: While the evaluation demonstrated that the STSEWBP had been experienced as an effective local response to serious problems, recommendations emerged that were more broadly applicable than the local context of Santa Teresa. The evaluation, therefore, as well as indicating that the STSEWBP was experienced positively by local people, also provided suggestions to be considered at a policy and organisational level to assist with a more widespread adoption of local and effective responses to community social and emotional wellbeing problems.