Culturally appropriate engagement strategies for collecting quality data in an Aboriginal population

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Background: South Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (respectfully referred to here as Aboriginal persons) comprise 1.7% of the SA population and live in all areas of the state. The process of identifying a representative Aboriginal population group for the purpose of research is therefore a complex task and challenges the researchers’ methodology. Working in Aboriginal communities poses questions and considerations for the researchers and the participants on cultural safety and appropriateness.

Method: Methodological rigour is essential for achieving quality data in population surveys, and methods need to be flexible to provide cultural appropriateness for all involved. Communities have a right to expect that if they agree to be involved in research, it will be of sufficiently high-quality and rigour to generate meaningful results, as well as the process being respectful of their culture and historical contexts.

The SA Aboriginal Health Survey (SAAHS) is a representative population survey of 399 randomly selected Aboriginal adults, aged 15 years and over, living in South Australia. Data were collected over a 12-month period with trained Aboriginal interviewers using a face-to-face questionnaire. Dwellings were selected from a sample of collector districts by screening for Aboriginal residents and asking for their consent to participate in the survey. Respondents provided self-report information on a number of issues, including socio-demographics; chronic illness; health risk factors; cultural activities; and health service usage.

To obtain this unique and robust data it was important that we addressed the needs of the communities we visited. Foremost, we:

• abandoned a 'one-size-fits-all' approach
• engaged communities through collaborative partnerships
• showed passion for the project, and how the participants would benefit; if not directly, then for their communities
• employed only Aboriginal interviewers and engaged local members of a community where possible
• provided gender choice for the interview
• listened to local knowledge and incorporated that into the data collection process
• always used inclusive language.

Conclusion: These data have been collected in a culturally responsible and respectful manner while adhering to strong methodological principles for quality data collection. We
are confident that by using respectful and culturally appropriate methods for the SAAHS, it has provided a high-quality data source of information that will be used to inform government policy and practice, with minimum negative impact on participants and their communities.