Beyond dreaming—nursing education for rural Aboriginal women

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Aim: The Aboriginal women’s health and education project aimed to provide rural Aboriginal women with a pathway into the health service that was previously unobtainable.

Method: The women were initially engaged in a health and fitness program that provided an environment that was culturally safe and inclusive. This approach led to improvements in the women’s fitness levels and also their social and emotional wellbeing. The strength, confidence and resilience the women gained was derived from a strong sense of trust that evolved throughout the program. The women’s new-found confidence led them to the university for information sessions on basic life support, injury prevention, Aboriginal health information and health career promotion. From these sessions the women developed an interest in nursing; however TAFE enrolment criteria limited mainstream enrolment for the majority of those interested in perusing a nursing career. With creativity, teamwork and partnerships an alternate entry was developed to allow the women to aspire to their dreams of a career in rural nursing.

Relevance: Aboriginal people are the focus of ongoing reporting and legislation. The Council of Australian Government identifies many initiatives that aim to address the discrepancies across many key areas in relation to Aboriginal people, forming the basis of the Closing the Gap policy. Improved outcomes in Aboriginal health is one such key area. National and international research has identified that Aboriginal people respond favourably to Aboriginal health professionals, leading to improved access and better health outcomes. With the training and employment of more Aboriginal people within the health profession, gaps may be addressed in rural health workforce shortages and improvements may be had in access and treatment of Aboriginal people.

Results: The target was to enrol ten women; however, interest had spread to the wider Aboriginal community and two classes were established to accommodate twenty enrolments. All twenty women completed Certificate II Health Service Assistant. Ten went on to complete Certificate III Health Service Assistant and from those ten, five gained cadetships with the NSW Ministry of Health under the Aboriginal Nursing and Midwifery Strategy to study as endorsed enrolled nurses.

Conclusion: The successful outcomes achieved throughout this program began with the commitment and foresight of all involved. The passion and community spirit kept it alive and the dedication of the women and their families saw obstacles overcome and dreams and goals realised. It cannot be underestimated that successful initiatives in Aboriginal communities require trust and transparency. No decisions were made throughout this program without ongoing open discussions with all parties. This provided the women with a safe environment where they grew and learned together.