Sowing the seeds of change: Urapuntja food gardens project

Susannah Summons
1Northern Territory Medicare Local

Aims: Urapuntja (Utopia) is a remote Indigenous community located 280 km north-east of Alice Springs. Diabetes and obesity pose a significant health burden, and the healthy food required to address these issues is expensive and difficult to source. Community members requested assistance to establish food gardens to supplement the fresh food supply of families living in the area.

Methods: The dietitian worked with community members to establish food gardens in remote outstations. Gardens were constructed in partnership with community members, who maintained the gardens on a day-to-day basis. The dietitian and two project workers visited regularly to support community members in the running of each garden.

Relevance: Poor access to healthy food is one of the key determinants of poor health outcomes in remote Indigenous communities. In the Urapuntja region, the fresh produce available in the community store would not be adequate to meet the dietary requirements of the community, should they eat according to the ‘Australian Guide to Healthy Eating’ recommendations. Food is expensive, and for some people the community store is 40 km away. Therefore, establishing an additional source of fresh produce in community outstations has the potential to improve people’s health and the management of chronic diseases such as diabetes.

Results: Twelve gardens have now been established in the outstations of the Urapuntja area, using a community development approach. A number of factors have impacted on the success of the gardens over a two-year period. These include the levels of sustained interest in the garden among community members, sorry business or bad weather that may influence people to move away from a garden site, success or failure in food production, and the level of support available. Of the 12 gardens that have been established, five are functioning independently.

Conclusions: Many factors affect whether a garden will be successful in terms of ongoing fresh food production, and food gardens should be considered as one strategy in a multi-strategy approach to address nutrition as a determinant of chronic disease.

The establishment of all gardens provided an opportunity for meaningful physical activity, and did lead to measurable changes in health parameters, such as blood sugar levels. Involvement with gardens generated a large amount of discussion about healthy food and how it is included alongside bush and store foods, and community members reported that the availability of fresh produce did lead to increased inclusion of fruit and vegetables in family meals.