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

Background
Santa Teresa, located approximately 80 kilometres south east of Alice Springs, is an Aboriginal community of more than 500 people. In response to significant and serious events in the community such as suicides and relationship violence, a social and emotional wellbeing program was developed. The Santa Teresa Social and Emotional WellBeing Program (STSEWBP) is a local initiative of the Santa Teresa community. It comprises a suite of activities conducted on an individual, family, and large group basis that are responsive to the needs of the community and its members. Activities include individual counselling, family therapy, narrative therapy, play therapy, sandplay, traditional healing, cultural activities such as men’s dancing, community engagement activities such as an annual horse trek, and community education.

While there were many indications that STSEWBP was successful, there was an expressed need to evaluate its effects more formally. Evaluation expertise was recruited externally to investigate the central research question: “What has been the impact of the STSEWBP?”. To answer this question semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of people involved in the STSEWBP including program operators, referrers, and program participants. A total of 21 people were interviewed.

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 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.

Method
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.

Results
Two major themes and nine subthemes 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 subthemes: 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.