

Cultural barriers to health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Mount Isa.

Short title: Cultural barriers to health care.

Kristin Emma McBain-Rigg
Mount Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health, James Cook University
Postal Address:
Mount Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health
P.O. Box 2572
Mount Isa QLD 4825
Email: kris.mcbain@jcu.edu.au
: (07) 4749 5130
Tel: (07) 4745 4500

Abstract and Keywords

Objective: This PhD study was designed to examine access barriers to health care in Mount Isa Queensland, Australia, and in particular, to examine 'cultural barriers' facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This paper details some of the findings of the study, around cultural barriers to care. Discussions about cultural barriers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Aboriginal Health Workers and other health professionals and community members, refined the meaning of this term and uncovered other issues disguised as 'cultural' difference.

Design: Ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation, diaries, formal/informal community and health professional interviews).

Setting: Mount Isa, Queensland, Australia.

Participants: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Aboriginal Health Workers, and other health professionals in Mount Isa between 2007 and 2009.

Results: Cultural barriers were considered differently by Aboriginal patients and health practitioners. While Aboriginal patients focused heavily on social relationships and issues of respect and trust, most practitioners seemed more focused on making Aboriginal people feel comfortable with changes to physical environments and systems, with less emphasis on creating strong interpersonal relationships.

Conclusions: The focus on interpersonal relationships between Aboriginal patients and health practitioners is still paramount in the minds of patients. Creating comforting physical environments and systems that are easier to navigate do assist in overcoming cultural barriers, but are often seen as little more than token gestures if trusting interpersonal relationships are not formed between patient and practitioner.

Keywords: access, indigenous health, health beliefs

What this paper adds

What is already known?

- *Internationally, minority populations face many barriers to the uptake of mainstream health care services, including language and cultural barriers.*
- *Indigenous Australians are identified as a population at risk of not accessing health care services, often because of language and cultural reasons.*
- *Culturally safe and appropriate practice in health care services is crucial to increasing the uptake of these services by Indigenous Australians.*

What does this study add?

- *An understanding of how various actors in health care situations define and describe 'culture', and thus identify where the disjunction may be between patients and providers.*
- *By challenging what is meant by the term 'cultural barriers' it is possible to better define and describe what these barriers may be.*
- *By better describing and defining cultural barriers, we can minimise the chance of other social and structural barriers being misinterpreted as 'cultural' barriers*