Feeling Deadly, *Working Deadly*

S2. UNDERSTANDING ABORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WAYS OF WORKING AND CREATING CULTURALLY SAFE WORKING ENVIRONMENTS

Theory Into Practice (TIP) sheet for managers/supervisors

This TIP sheet is intended for supervisors and managers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander[1] alcohol and other drug (AOD) workers. It is part of a suite of resources that has been produced by the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) at Flinders University to enhance Indigenous worker wellbeing and reduce work-related stress.

The resources were developed following a review of relevant literature; and an extensive consultation process involving public submissions, a national on-line survey, interviews and focus groups. Quotations from the consultations appear in italics in the TIP sheets.

Introduction

Indigenous AOD workers may face many unique stressors. These stem from:

- The complex needs of their clients
- Role stigmatisation (stemming from negative attitudes towards AOD work and from racism towards them and their clients)
- A lack of cultural understanding and support from non-Indigenous health workers.

Culturally safe working environments are critically important to reduce these stressors and maximise workers' ability to contribute to services.

A culturally safe working environment is where:

- Employees are valued
- There is no threat to, or denial of, employees' identities, or their needs
- Respect, listening, dignity, having a shared understanding, knowledge and experience is ensured
- Staff learn, live and work together with dignity (Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia, as cited in Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, 2010).

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1 The terms Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous are used interchangeably throughout this document. We understand that some people have a preference for using one term over the other and we have used the terms interchangeably to be sensitive to these differing perspectives.

There are some important cultural differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of working. Understanding these differences is essential to creating culturally safe environments and reducing the stressors experienced by Indigenous AOD workers.

Understanding, acceptance and respect for Indigenous ways of working is growing slowly. However, a recent survey of Indigenous AOD workers found that it is still more likely the exception rather than the rule (Roche et al., 2010). Many workers reported receiving little acknowledgment or support for Indigenous ways of working. Typically, mainstream norms were expected to be adopted and Indigenous ways of working were given tokenistic, if any, recognition.

Indigenous ways of working uphold the values, beliefs and social structures of land, family and kinship.

Post-Colonial Indigenous History

Colonisation dramatically changed the experience of family life for Indigenous Australians from the way it had been for 60,000 years. It resulted in:

- Traumatic distress
- Chronic anxiety
- Physical ill-health
- Mental distress including fear and depression
- High levels of substance misuse problems
- High imprisonment rates.

"We know that there are layers upon layers of issues that the individual or their families are currently dealing with and the impacts of that stem from colonisation, stolen generations and premature death within our community." (Indigenous manager)

This has resulted in incalculable trauma, depression and major mental health problems for Indigenous Australians across several generations (Dawe et al., 2007). Understanding this is fundamental to creating culturally safe working environments.

Kinship

For Indigenous people, kinship connects a wide range of individuals through blood, marriage, and skin relationships. Complex, extended kinship systems are fundamental elements of Indigenous communities and part of connectedness to each other, spirit and country. In kinship relationships:

- There need not be a biological relationship for a family bond to exist
- Sibling status can extend to cousins, regardless of birth generation
- Aunts and uncles may take on parental, or often grandparental, status
- A range of social and behavioural structures exist which define obligatory roles and strengthen communities through upholding respect and reciprocity.

"I don't think there is much of a separation between the words 'family' and community and that Aboriginal community sees the whole community as their family. So making that separation is just not as easy as you would do." (Indigenous worker)

Many Indigenous AOD workers experience a lack of understanding from employers and colleagues in regard to kinship systems and the obligations they entail.

Commitment to Community

Many Indigenous AOD workers have a strong commitment to their communities – this is at the heart of what it means to be an Indigenous person. For Indigenous AOD workers it means:

- Their principal source of identity is as a "community member" while for many mainstream health workers their sense of identity is shaped by their professional role (e.g., being a health worker/doctor/nurse)
- Personal allegiance and commitment to community come first and other roles and identities are secondary
- Workers may feel that they are never "off duty" and always available to respond to community needs

- Boundaries that separate work and home life can become blurred as a result of cultural obligations
- Many have a strong desire to effect change and address social inequities.

"You wake up in the community, you go to sleep in the community, you're a community member." (Indigenous manager)

Grief and Loss

Indigenous Australians experience much higher death rates than non-Indigenous Australians across all age groups and for all major causes of death (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011). Grief and loss experiences of Indigenous AOD workers can be profound; well beyond experiences encountered by mainstream society.

"People talk about compassion fatigue, well maybe there is grief fatigue." (Indigenous manager)

The death of young people and children, including suicides, is a major contributor to overwhelming grief and loss issues for Indigenous workers and their communities.

The pervasive nature of loss and grief is not always well understood by non-Indigenous people and Indigenous workers may be discomforted by the need to justify their grieving processes for community or kinship members.

Many workers may experience a lack of support in this area and conventional bereavement leave may be inadequate and create further stress for Indigenous AOD workers.

Sorry Business

Following the death of an Indigenous person there is a mourning period called Sorry Business which can have an immense impact on Indigenous workers.

"So much grief and loss, always in Sorry Business mode ...hard to do your job." (Indigenous worker)

Without adequate support to participate in Sorry Business and culturally appropriate ways of mourning, feelings of sorrow and bereavement may accumulate over several generations. This is known as intergenerational grief and loss.

For Indigenous AOD workers, not taking time to attend a funeral and pay one's respects reflects very badly on them. Attendance is a cultural requirement. Indigenous workers may need more bereavement leave days than currently available under most workplace policies.

Holistic Approaches to Health

Holistic care is a fundamental feature of Indigenous ways of working. It involves seeing and understanding individuals within the context of their family and community, rather than in isolation.

Indigenous AOD workers have reported that their clients want their care provided within the context of their family and the broader community. This often involves greater time commitment and more intensive use of resources.

"... want recovery to happen within their family. One service places a lot of emphasis on the individual, which doesn't work very well with Aboriginal people because not only are they the client's issues, but the current environment's as well." (Indigenous manager)

Women's Business, Men's Business

According to long-established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lore, sharing responsibility between men and women reveres the strength, knowledge and essence of what it means to be a man or a woman. The assignment of "roles and life ways" is determined by gender.

For Indigenous workers, maintaining cultural integrity within the workplace and recognising Women's Business, Men's Business, is of crucial importance. This can be complicated where cultural needs and work expectations do not fit well with traditional gender roles.

Some organisations may require workers to carry out duties which conflict with their cultural values and beliefs. This can be a major source of stress for workers.

> "Some people that you can't deal with because women won't open up to a bloke. Like you got Women's Business and Men's Business. It's pretty important to have a female worker as well." (Indigenous manager)

Indigenous Concepts of Time

A major difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of working involves the concept of time. Indigenous AOD workers may have a more contemplative and considered approach to tackling tasks. This may necessitate greater allocation of time than might usually be required.

Incorporating Indigenous ways of working into workplace practice also means allocating time to decision making processes and including the intricate, complex system of consultation that embodies Indigenous cultural practice.

Community consultation is often an essential requirement for workers. It takes time to ensure that the appropriate people have been consulted. It involves seeking and listening to the views and knowledge of Indigenous people in order to develop, implement and evaluate the way AOD services should be provided.

> "Some people may say we're lazy but we're not. We're thinkers, we're talkers. You see a group of Elders sitting, nutting something around and around till suddenly they find the right answer, that's how we work as people." (Indigenous manager)

Respect for Elders

Showing respect for Elders is a further central feature of Indigenous culture. Elders are the foundation of community, imparting knowledge, wisdom and guidance through story. This is achieved through a system of reciprocity whereby workers and Elders support each other.

The position of Elders within Indigenous society is extremely important, as it is recognised that with age comes status and wisdom. It can also be difficult, and culturally inappropriate, for Indigenous AOD workers to refuse requests from Elders.

The "tug of war" between work requirements, and cultural expectations and obligations can be a source of stress for Indigenous workers.

> "I've had Elders ringing and they want you to come out at 10pm, you can't say no, once you say no you lose all respect from the community and that's hard to get back. You just go deal with it." (Indigenous worker)

Connection to Country and Health

"Country" refers to the lands to which Indigenous peoples have a traditional attachment or relationship. Connection to Country occurs through specific localised knowledge of a region's natural history coupled with complex layers of past personal and family experiences, and deeper connection to the past (and therefore to Indigenous) identity via traditional stories and beliefs.

Connection to land and people is maintained through hunting and gathering and simply being on Country. Indigenous peoples' relationship with Country is complex and multifaceted.

Country and connection to Country is linked to:

- Caring for Country
- Maintaining health and cultural life
- Identity
- Individual autonomy
- Indigenous sovereignty (Ganesharajah, 2009).

There are two important implications for employers of Indigenous AOD workers:

1. The first is the strong obligation workers may feel to care for Country and all within it.

2. The second is that as a result of the limited availability of services, Indigenous clients are often required to travel some distance to receive AOD treatment and care. It is important to acknowledge what it means for these clients to be *out of their own lands* and often in a foreign nation, with all the attendant disorientation and homesickness. This can be a major source of stress for workers who may feel that by not referring clients to culturally safe, local services they are failing to provide appropriate care.

Connection to Country, and behaviours that are related to Country, are now recognised and understood to be an important determinant of health and central to wellbeing, for both clients and workers. Incorporating the importance of Country into workplace practices is central to creating culturally safe environments.

Summary

Indigenous AOD work must be understood from a historical and cultural context in order to fully comprehend the source of threats to Indigenous workers' wellbeing and to create culturally safe working environments.

Indigenous ways of working incorporate practices that:

- Reflect Indigenous knowledge
- Uphold cultural integrity
- Include principles of reciprocity.

When these principles are undermined it impacts on the health and wellbeing of the Indigenous community and Indigenous workers and contributes to work-related stress.

Culturally unsafe working environments can significantly undermine the ability of Indigenous AOD workers to undertake their roles. Such environments can force workers to choose between conforming to the requirements of the work environment or meeting kinship, community and Country expectations.

A failure by supervisors and managers to recognise the importance of community consultation, gender roles, the need to respect Elders, the importance of Country and different concepts of time add to difficulties in managing and treating often severely disadvantaged clients.

References

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Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (2010). *Cultural Safety Training: Identification of cultural safety training needs*. South Melbourne, Victoria: RACGP.

Where to get more information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce support

To find out more information about what is available to you locally, we recommend that you contact your relevant state or territory's peak community controlled health organisation. Most of these organisations offer a wide variety of workforce support options, including workforce development units, health worker networks, accredited training courses and newsletters and magazines. In most instances they should be able to refer you to an appropriate organisation in your region. Contact details are provided below.

ACT: Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Services
Ph: 02 6284 6222

NSW: Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales (AH&MRC)
Ph: 02 9212 4777

NT: Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT)
Ph: 08 8944 6666

QLD: Queensland Aboriginal & Islander Health Council (QAIHC)
Ph: 07 3328 8500

SA: Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia (AHCSA)
Ph: 08 8273 7200

TAS: Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre
Ph: 03 6234 0700

VIC: Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)
Ph: 03 9411 9411

WA: Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA)
Ph: 08 9227 1631