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# Indigenous men's groups and social and emotional well-being: an indigenous doctor's perspective

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** Traditional indigenous society promoted the social and emotional well-being of indigenous men through the meeting of men in daily life and during ceremonial times. There is an increasing recognition that men's groups use similar mechanisms to enhance the social and emotional well-being of participants and their communities. This paper seeks to increase understanding of the processes and impacts of contemporary indigenous men's groups from an indigenous doctor's perspective.

**Method:** Review of published and unpublished literature and reflections on the primary author's experiences within several indigenous men's groups using a participatory action research model were used to examine how participation within these groups can improve social and emotional well-being.

**Results:** There is a scarcity of published data on the distribution, activities and outcomes of indigenous men's groups. Published qualitative and experiential observations suggest that they contribute to improved social and emotional well-being for participants, their families and communities.

**Conclusions:** Men's groups may be a good adjunct to the outpatient care of indigenous patients. As the published literature is entirely qualitative, mixed methods evaluation using appropriate and sensitive measures would assist in systematically capturing the impacts and outcomes of men's groups. Such evaluations could enhance programme longevity and encourage the referral of patients by mainstream mental health practitioners.

**Keywords:** empowerment, indigenous Australians, indigenous men's groups, social and emotional well-being, social determinants

The term 'social and emotional well-being' (SEWB) has been widely adopted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a concept that departs from the biomedical definitions of 'mental health'. It has been defined as 'the emotional and psychological aspects of child and adult development as well as the importance and nature of the social and community relationships supporting good health'.<sup>1</sup> SEWB resonates well with the overall concept of Aboriginal health encompassing the well-being of the individual, family and community.<sup>1</sup> Empowerment is an essential psychosocial process that impacts directly on SEWB and promotes subsequent improvement in health outcomes as people gain more insight and control over their lives and choices.<sup>2</sup>

The SEWB and health of indigenous men has been affected by a history of colonisation. Indigenous men's

groups endeavour to improve the SEWB of communities through the healing and empowerment of men and enhancing their collective capacity to address specific health and lifestyle issues within the community. Biomedical training often neglects these aspects of health by overlooking the potential health-promoting partnerships that could be fostered between clinical services and informal community groups. A lack of understanding among clinicians may contribute to poor referral pathways and fragmented patient care. This brief literature review is combined with the first author's

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(an Aboriginal Junior Medical Officer) reflections on his experiences as observer-participant in men's groups located in Yarrabah, Queensland, Redfern, New South Wales and Raymond Terrace, New South Wales.

## Overview of Australian indigenous male health

Indigenous men may be the most disadvantaged group in Australia, both socioeconomically and emotionally, as they grapple with high levels of trauma, grief and the loss of a specific role and respect within the community. This has a tremendous impact on the SEWB of indigenous men and communities<sup>3</sup> and contributes to their high disease burden and short life expectancy of 67.2 years compared with 78.7 years for non-indigenous men.<sup>4</sup>

Traditional Aboriginal culture had a number of protective factors that ensured the positive SEWB of men. This includes an individual's identity and role being deeply rooted within the community. This role was shaped by other men within the community as one moved through the life cycle.<sup>3</sup> Recovery of these protective pathways is being sought in an organised way through the establishment of men's groups.

## Indigenous men's groups

The published literature does not reveal the number of men's groups currently in operation in Australia or their activities.<sup>5</sup> Collecting data is complicated by the vulnerability of men's groups as a result of their instability and lack of funding. This is in part due to their unrecognised potential to improve SEWB. Interviews with participants and founders of men's groups conducted by the authors consistently revealed that indigenous men's groups endeavour to improve the SEWB of participants and communities through the empowerment of men using local approaches.

The primary author has been fortunate enough to meet with and participate in meetings of the Yaba Bimbie Men's Group in Yarrabah, QLD, Gamarada Men's Group in Redfern, NSW and Kup-poon-dee Community Services Men's Group in Raymond Terrace, NSW. Yarrabah is a discrete Aboriginal community located 54 km south of Cairns. The Yaba Bimbie Men's Group commenced in 1998 in response to a number of issues in the community, including youth suicide.<sup>6</sup> Activities of the Yarrabah men's group include weekly health education sessions, counselling, men's health clinics and social activities for all men in the community. The group welcomes men with no particular issues as well as those who abuse alcohol, have a history of violence or have been involved in the correctional system. The outcomes from these programmes have been evaluated by The University of Queensland and James Cook University using participatory action research methods.<sup>7,8</sup>

The Gamarada Men's Group offers a 10-week self-healing programme targeted at Aboriginal men in the Redfern,

Sydney area. The group has welcomed non-Aboriginal men to take part in their programmes. The programme focuses on using practical approaches to regulate emotions and promotes the healing of men with a focus on community, spirituality and culture. The activities of the men's group are varied and include youth mentorship, indigenous art initiatives and healthy lifestyle planning.<sup>9</sup> Although there has been no formal evaluation to date, many participants have completed the growth and empowerment measure and found it relevant to the changes they experienced as a result of the Gamarada programme.<sup>10</sup>

The Kup-poon-dee Community Services Men's Group meets once a fortnight and is open to indigenous men in the Port Stephens Council Area. The group endeavours to empower indigenous men to negotiate challenges in their lives by fostering connections with land and culture and to promote the education of topics relating to health and SEWB. At present, the group is focusing on reviving and supporting traditional indigenous culture through the making of instruments, including didgeridoos, and artwork. The men's group is developing a pilot programme to engage Aboriginal children in schools in the local area with cultural experiences and mentoring.

## Impact of indigenous men's groups on SEWB

There is little published data on the outcomes of men's groups. The majority of published work relates to the Yaba Bimbie Men's Group due to the close and trusting relationship with empowerment researchers from two universities.<sup>8</sup> The evaluations have suggested that indigenous men's groups achieve positive outcomes for participants and their communities by promoting protective factors for SEWB and by eliminating or reducing the effect of risk factors. Protective factors for the SEWB of indigenous men may be summarised as including social cohesion and a close relationship to one's ancestral land, spirituality and culture. Risk factors include grief, loss and trauma from a history of colonisation, violence, substance use, separation with culture and identity issues, social and economic disadvantage, poor physical health and incarceration.<sup>2</sup> Men's groups may be effective adjuncts to mainstream health services as they can seamlessly approach problems within the individual, family and community spheres, are led by members of the community, are well placed to support men throughout their life cycle and are more culturally appropriate and acceptable to indigenous men. This is compared with mainstream mental health services that are commonly orientated towards acute or severe mental illness.<sup>11</sup>

## Promotion of social cohesion

An evaluation report of the Yaba Bimbie Men's Support Group in 2006 commented on the empowerment experienced by men within the groups and their ability to determine the causes of the issues in indigenous

communities. Participants reported a lack of 'traditional culture' or their 'spirit being taken away'.<sup>8</sup> By identifying the root causes of the problems facing the community, the men are motivated to work collaboratively to build a stronger personal and family identity. Sharing and taking part in cultural activities reinforces their cultural and community identity.<sup>8</sup> The evaluation report also captured the formation of respectful relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.<sup>7,8</sup> This occurs in a less formalised process during Gamarada meetings as both indigenous and non-indigenous men undertake the programme together.

### **Increase in self-esteem and confidence**

The author was overwhelmed by the confidence of the men in the Gamarada programme. While attending meetings, the participants spoke with conviction regarding indigenous rights advocacy in the presence of their peers. Many had leadership roles within community organisations. The men's group offered a transformative space wherein positive reinforcement of the abilities of individual participants was able to be achieved in an appropriate way. Testimonies of the participants indicate that the men's group was instrumental in their development as confident and 'empowered' men.

Participants of indigenous men's groups frequently self-report increased levels of self-esteem and confidence. This is exemplified by an increase in community members attending and participating in public meetings. Specifically, they have also reported spending more time with their children, increased desire to seek employment, reduction in alcohol and drug use, suicide and family violence.<sup>8</sup> Systematically collected qualitative data have indicated that men's groups stimulate greater help-seeking among participants within the group, with other men and healthcare professionals rather than responding to challenging life events with alcohol and substance use. This has been corroborated by non-participants.<sup>8</sup> The importance of the increased self-esteem and its overarching effects on well-being has been extensively described.<sup>12</sup>

### **Facilitating a closer relationship to ancestral land, spirituality and culture**

Men's groups allow participants to rediscover traditional roles by providing a quarantined time when men are able to meet without distraction. This has been observed to be instrumental in empowering men to reflect on the negative strategies they have used to address their health problems and work collaboratively to promote change. This quarantined time also facilitates examination of the effects of colonisation on the indigenous view of health. The Kup-poon-dee Community Services Men's Group uses this time to facilitate connection to land by teaching participants how to make traditional instruments and indigenous art. As previously reported in this journal, it is also encouraging to see the Yaba Bimble,

Gamarada and Kup-poon-dee Community Services Men's Groups identify the importance of passing their collective life experience to younger men and boys and setting aside time to educate them regarding positive adult behaviours.

### **Providing strategies to heal from grief, loss and identity issues**

Indigenous men's groups offer a safe environment in which men can explore their roles within contemporary and traditional society. The facilitators provide a relaxed atmosphere free of judgement and prejudice. The transformative effects of these safe spaces has been well established.<sup>11</sup> By encouraging peers to share their own experiences, these groups provide participants with skills and practical approaches to understanding grief and loss. These are invaluable to indigenous men, who may find the mainstream services addressing these issues as culturally unsafe. Moreover, the strategies proposed by other men are often more acceptable and achievable by their peers and potentially more likely to be effective considering their appropriateness.

Men's groups are able to offer a forum in which taboo issues can be discussed and men can be comfortable engaging in conversation without prejudice. Identifying and articulating these issues is a significant step forward in addressing issues of grief, as experiencing these feelings can be associated with feelings of shame. This unaddressed grief and resulting shame can perpetuate a cycle of escalating disempowerment that can be dealt with through discussion, recognising that experiences are shared and receiving support, empathy and understanding by their peers.<sup>8</sup>

### **Improving physical health and prevention of chronic diseases**

The use of exercise and nutrition programmes and the provision of healthy food and education during sessions have been used by the men's groups to prevent chronic illnesses in indigenous communities. Role modelling positive health behaviours during these sessions will ideally lead to improved practices in families and ultimately communities. Particular focus is paid to smoking, alcohol consumption, the importance of a healthy diet and structured exercise.

### **Positive steps away from crime and incarceration**

Role modelling by community members who have previously had contact with the corrections system has been used in the Gamarada group to discourage other men from committing offences. These groups offer a forum whereby members are able to reflect on their own experiences with the legal community and encourage participants to consider their own personal circumstances.

The Kup-poon-dee Community Services Men's Group augments role-modelling by actively encouraging involvement in community forums focusing on violence in indigenous communities. Overall, this equates to an increased capacity for personal change for participants. This has the potential flow-on effects for families and communities as men become more determined to undertake behavioural change and realise the potential for the community to reach collective goals.<sup>8</sup> However, the authors were unable to identify any published quantitative data demonstrating a protective effect of indigenous men's groups on the incidence of criminal events.

The corroborative efforts of empowered men allow the scope of men's groups to include advocating on behalf of those who are charged with criminal offences. Men's groups are potentially effective advocates for the rights of indigenous peoples by readily identifying problems within the community and facilitating participants to work collaboratively to reach their potential to enact change in their environments. Members of the Gamarada group have been involved in planning legal support for members of the community when deemed needed by participants.

## Conclusions

The continuing process of colonisation has degraded the health and SEWB of indigenous Australians. Evaluative documentation of indigenous men's groups has revealed a consistent set of narratives indicating improvements in health literacy, self-determination, connection to land and culture and social cohesion contributing to the improvement in SEWB of indigenous men and communities. There is the potential for reduction in crime and chronic disease in the long term. Indigenous men's groups offer a holistic approach to healing throughout the life cycle and effectively operationalise traditional factors that promoted positive health behaviours. These groups are built from the ground up by members of the community and there are few services that can offer similar care. This supports the case for indigenous men's groups to be considered as a potentially effective addition to outpatient care of patients engaged with mainstream mental health services. It is prudent that men's groups develop closer relationships with research institutions to promote evaluation using a participatory action research model with the aim of validating any positive impact on the SEWB of indigenous Australians.

## Disclosure

The authors report no conflict of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this paper.

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