

Centering Indigenous voices in health

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, referred to as First Nations peoples here, have resided on the continent of Australia for millennia. Comprising hundreds of language, social and nation groups, there is considerable diversity and heterogeneity in First Nations perspectives, customs, and culture. There is, however, a shared understanding in First Nations cultures of a holistic view of health encompassing personal, environmental and cultural wellbeing that supports the health of all in the community.^{1,2} Although this understanding of health continues today, many other factors contribute to the ongoing health disparities in Australia, including the social determinants of health, as well as historical and contemporary trauma.³ Notably, one-third of the First Nations population are adolescents,⁴ with the health and wellbeing of present-day adolescents being central to cultural continuity and prosperity of these peoples. Of concern, First Nations children and adolescents in Australia experience one of the highest reported rates of treatable skin infections in the world.⁵ Many studies have indicated that these common skin infections can contribute to severe and long-term health impacts, therefore reducing these infections remains a substantial unmet health need requiring timely responses.

McRae and colleagues have approached this by gathering information from relevant communities through culturally appropriate, semi-structured interviews, or 'yarning sessions'.⁶ This approach has allowed the authors to centre First Nations voices, identifying strengths and gaps in available resources, services and education. With this approach, the authors showed that individuals in these communities have a strong understanding of the model of treatment and prevention of skin infections, as well as environmental and social determinants of health such as overcrowding and water availability. The emerging links between common skin infections and rheumatic heart disease (RHD) were less well understood, and there were varied views on the normalisation of these conditions in communities.

Notably, traditional bush medicines are reported to be an effective and common treatment for skin infections in these communities, including by health care professionals. These bush medicines have been an important part of First Nations cultural practices for millennia, being part of connection to "Country", as it is known in Australia, which includes elements of the land, sea, waterways, sky, stars, and other entities often specific to an Indigenous Nation or Nations. While many traditional bush medicine practices may not be well recognised by mainstream medicine, their continued use highlights the view of healthcare held by many Indigenous peoples. Managing these conditions may require best-practices to be identified that align with these views, considerate of medically and ecologically responsible use, and mindful of varied perspectives and connections with culture and country.⁷ McRae and colleagues are mindful that many bush medicines have been shown as safe and efficacious, going on to be adapted and used by mainstream medicine.⁸

Related initiatives are aimed at revitalising traditional languages, preserving and amending cultural practices, and promoting connection with country; many Indigenous communities are working to preserve traditional lands and aspects of self-representation and self-determination, following policies and actions made to undermine Indigenous peoples and their culture. The study by McRae and colleagues highlights the importance of this revitalisation, with community members in the study being able to share knowledge, experiences and recommendations for practical paths forward to improve the health and wellbeing of those in their communities. As outsiders, centering these Indigenous voices rather than having them on the margins will be needed in responding to these challenges ethically and effectively.

Rather than these patterns being observed in Australia alone, Indigenous peoples in many Australasian countries have a high burden of disease for common skin infections, including New Zealand and Pacific Island nations.^{9,10} This further illustrates the continuing impacts of societal and historical factors on Indigenous peoples, and the importance of being receptive to local perspectives. Specifically for Australia, this comes at a time when First Nations Voices to parliament are at the forefront of public discussion, potentially centering these perspectives on a broader stage. The response to health disparities



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such as common skin infections in children and adolescents should similarly be culturally aware and considerate, as well as being a focus of sustained effort and investment, otherwise these disparities will be felt for generations to come.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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