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The power of Aboriginal Health Workers in delivering a culturally safe physical exercise program

Rob McPhee, CEO - Danila Dilba Health Service NT, Born and grew up on Noongar Country in Western Australia, with cultural ties to the Waanyi people of Queensland, Njamal people of the Pilbara, and Yamatji people from the Midwest region of WA.

Transcript:

My name is Rob McPhee, and I'm the CEO of Danila Dilba Health Service, Darwin's only Aboriginal community controlled health service. I was born and grew up on Noongar Country in Western Australia and have cultural ties to the Waanyi people of Queensland, Njamal people of the Pilbara, and Yamatji people from the mid-west region of WA.

Cultural safety, both within the organization and through the services that we deliver, is a central focus at Danila Dilba. From our bubs to our Elders we want everybody to feel safe and welcome at our health service, as this goes a long way towards improving the overall health outcomes of community.

To embed cultural safety at a clinical level we aim to operate an Aboriginal Health Practitioner (or AHP as we call them) first approach. This means that wherever possible, our clients see an AHP before they see a nurse or a GP.

We're also running a program to train our own AHPs Groups, with three due to graduate in early 2026 and another three moving into their second year.

Our AHP trainees work alongside clinical staff, learning on the job while simultaneously completing their qualifications through the Batchelor Institute. Elsewhere around Danila Dilba, our allied health team have created a culturally safe space through the Danila Dilba Gym Group, where the Gym Group supports clients living with chronic conditions like

diabetes, chronic lung disease, heart disease, chronic pain, osteoarthritis, kidney disease and high blood pressure, helping them to live life to the fullest.

The Gym Group is the only Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander physiotherapy led gym group of its kind in Darwin. It aims to help our mob reap the numerous evidence-based benefits of physical activity, without those barriers of costs, weather, transport, shame or judgment. Prior to joining our gym group, the majority of our clients wouldn't enter a gym for fear of these barriers. Around half did zero regular exercise, and 56% of the group had type two diabetes.

Now our clients meet twice a week for free at the Charles Darwin University gym, working through their individualised exercise programs, all while being supported by our physios and an Indigenous allied health assistant.

In just two years, client attendances have tripled and participants have been able to achieve long term lifestyle changes. This includes a 69 year old man and a 34 year old man who both reversed their diabetes. It includes a 50 year old man who has lost over 20kg and no longer needs a walker or at home oxygen. And it also includes a 34 year old woman who has returned to work after getting on top of a chronic pain. These are just some examples.

Our clients attend the gym group for both physical and mental benefits. It's a place they can come to meet up with old friends, experience connection to community and regaining their confidence. The changes we've observed in these clients and in others around the Danila Dilba is why we do the work we do. It's our way of giving back to our mob by being the culturally safe, comprehensive health service that they need.