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Social Determinant: the Tangentyere Story
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Introduction:

Good morning

At first thought I was ready to decline the opportunity to speak to you all. I have never been comfortable addressing health audiences about things we as Aboriginal community members have been told we have no credibility to understand or to contribute to. I suppose the reality is, as Aboriginal Australians, the program of colonisation has been successful, in so far as it has meant that we continuously question whether or not we have something to offer. But on further consideration, I realised that to accept the status quo was to further accept the very processes that have undermined the health and well being of Aboriginal people throughout Australia's more recent history.

Consideration of the role of colonisation in the poor state of Aboriginal health has been a continued throughout the years. White man not only brought infectious diseases we had never witnessed to these shores, they brought with them a process of devaluing and reorienting the way in which Aboriginal people were supposed to live. Direct efforts at depopulation through conflict were at least recognisable as direct threats to an Aboriginal way of life. The harm of cultural reorientation, forbidding of speaking and learning traditional languages and ways of life, undermining the roles and responsibilities of parenting, and forced relocation of multiple language groups into mission settlements were far more destructive. Unhealthy public policies followed unhealthy public policy. Protectionism gave way to assimilation. Unfortunately, we continue to bear the brunt of these efforts of 're-educating the savages'. Individuals, families, and communities have crumbled under the assault, and we struggle to pick up the pieces day after day.

But these assaults are not just relegated to the pages of history. Although the face of the self-appointed protectionists has changed, the new face of assimilation is mainstreaming, medical gate-keeping and self appointed do-gooders. Their hearts may be in the right place, but the consequences remain disastrous. By failing to acknowledge what Aboriginal people have to offer themselves and the rest of society, injury remains the only outcome. To us as Aboriginal people, this continues to undermine the very principles which form the foundation of health promotion in its most complete sense.

Health promotion, as a term, has also been a casualty of colonisation within Indigenous communities. It has been misappropriated, like much of the determinants of health and well-being for Aboriginal people.

There remains a strong commitment to understanding the social determinants of health, particularly as it relates to Aboriginal peoples. But we continue to think about these determinants in a vacuum, devoid of the essential cultural foundations of Aboriginal life. Yes, we accept that workplace stress is bad for health. We agree that education and the reduction of poverty are fundamentally important targets for reducing Aboriginal health disadvantage. These are the things we fight for day after day. But any discussion of the social determinants of Aboriginal health without consideration of culture and the foundations of Aboriginal life is devoid of context and meaning, and further devalues the things that define us as a people. This not only contributes to direct harm, but continues to undermine the very things critical to promoting health amongst Aboriginal people.

As a consequence of these misguided policies, health promotion has become a term synonymous with audiovisual educational material, as a means to 'educate' Aboriginal people to understand the world through white man's eyes. This is destined to failure as so much of the policy relating to Aboriginal Health in the past has been. If only people were to ask us, what is it that protects and preserves the future health of Aboriginal Australia? We could say. It has been passed from generation to generation. It is something we have always known. The broader definition of health promotion is within our hands and our hearts. Just like it has always been.

But the medical and scientific world has done us a fundamental disservice. Doctors and researchers who continue to tell us that health promotion is beyond the realms of everyday people, is too complicated or specialised undermines the very principles which are fundamental to creating and sustaining healthy communities. Self determination, identity, access to and protection of individual and communal rights, access to country and culture, caring for each other and the world in which we live, the ability to lead a life aligned to the very essence of what it is to be Aboriginal. These are the foundations of healthy life, of grounded health promotion, of a future that we all can look forward to.

I hear that a group of experts got together in Ottawa, Canada in 1986 and developed a charter that outlined the fundamental principles of what defines health promotion.

These included:

- Increasing peoples control over their health,
- That people must be able to identify and realise their goals, satisfy their needs, and to cope with their environment.
- The Fundamental role of advocacy to achieve health for all
- That policy must support the fight for a fair go for even the most disadvantaged

In Aboriginal life, these principles are also revered, and have marked the political struggle of Aboriginal activism in this country, and I am sure around the world. These terms are not foreign to us, these ideas are not unusual, specialised or out of our comprehension. These are the things that matter most to us, and that have been systematically stolen from us year after year.

On reflection, it is amazing to me that it took so long for people to agree that these things were the fundamental principles of what supports healthy lives. For Aboriginal people, these things have been known since our time began. They don't represent a 'charter', but they define the way of life that has been followed from generation to generation to generation before us. They are passed in stories, song, dance and ceremony for the preservation of life, health and beyond.

In Aboriginal life, we have more than a charter, we share with all of those who walked the earth before us a knowledge and way of life that is defined and protected by eons of wisdom. These ways are written in the sands beneath our feet. They are sung into the hills and trees around us. They are walked from place to place, connecting Aboriginal people to each other and to place through time. They are danced into the red dust, the salt water, the mud flats, the mountains, the salt lakes and sand-hills.

Narrow definitions of health promotion seek to undermine the fundamentals of Aboriginal survival throughout the ages, and the building blocks of health and well-being for all time. Narrow definitions, created and misappropriated by western sciences and medical worlds serve to destroy the very principles with which our health as Aboriginal people is maintained and promoted. Meanwhile, we debate the issues of health promotion without regard for the generations of wisdom and sense of self and place that Aboriginal society has always known. These fundamental mistakes are undermining the essence of what it means to be healthy, and the foundations of health promotion.

This failure to recognise Aboriginal peoples' expertise, knowledge and wisdom causes harm on top of harm. It is the essence of the injury of colonisation, lived and re-lived throughout successive generations.

This then becomes a critical determinant of the health of Aboriginal people, and as such a critical target for creating and sustaining an environment which supports the promotion of health.

Since the arrival of Europeans to this country, Aboriginal people have been colonised, marginalised, exterminated, re-educated, re-organised, de-cultured, dispossessed, subjugated, judged, jailed, paroled then re-incarcerated.

But we have never been protected, or allowed to protect ourselves from adversity. Its regularity carves itself in our minds, bodies and country. As we are scarred so to are the things fundamentally important to our health, and the promotion of things that sustain us throughout time and shifting futures.

Survival requires that we are able to dynamically shift between ways of knowing and ways of being. To survive colonisation, one must, by necessity, be strong, resilient, grounded and connected to history, the present and future. But to reach this state of being has taken untold generations of trial and error, and worst still it has claimed the lives of many casualties. Many of my family, countrymen and women have fallen in the fight for surviving against all the odds. It has and remains to be a war of attrition. But we continue to survive nonetheless.

Its time that Aboriginal people redefined what health promotion actually is, so that all people can share what it is to coexist in harmony with all things, all people and all places. More still, so that all the world can learn to survive adversity, and can build and sustain health for generations to come. Better still, perhaps someone should have asked us in the first place. We have been working on this for millennia.

So what is it that promotes the health of Aboriginal people?

- Our struggle for identity in the face of overwhelming forces of colonisation is a critical factor.
- Our right to self-determination stands paramount for the protection of the next generations of Aboriginal children.
- Our fight for control over the things that matter most to us are fundamental – the education of our children [both traditional and mainstream]; the right to access to social and health services that meet our needs; the access to opportunity in contemporary Australian society; the right to a fair go in all aspects of our lives; the freedom from discrimination of all kinds; the chance to fulfil our obligations to our children, culture and future; a safe and prosperous community; a functional and healthy house; the right to follow our own path, speak our own languages and have our children learn about the culture of their grandparents and their grandparents before them; the safety and well being of our elders; the continuity of our culture without the meddling of others.
- The right to be heard and respected as Aboriginal people.
- The right to Aboriginal Self-Government
- The recognition of Aboriginal Law and structures of governance
- Respect for and Protection of Aboriginal Land
- Full participation in the political process

These things therefore define the goals of health promotion among Aboriginal people. Unfortunately, we continue to expect that by some miraculous twist of fate, that modern society will allow us to define our own way forward.

But the ways to approach these things have been laid down in the foundations of Aboriginal life for all time. Each of these is guided by principles laid down in our own 'charter', our own healthy public policy. The charter of Aboriginal survival and sovereignty.

The foundations of Aboriginal health promotion lie within Tjukurrpa, Walytja, Ngurra, Kanyini.

These things guide every aspect of Aboriginal life, throughout the ages. They create and sustain harmony with all things and all people through time, thereby creating and maintaining healthy environments. They guide us to survival against all adversity. They mandate our relationships, our obligations and responsibilities to each other and all things on and within the earth, thereby defining the healthiest of public policy. They support the central role of Aboriginal customary law and practice, protecting even the most vulnerable against the difficulties of life. They mandate the teaching and nurturing of subsequent generations within the supportive blanket of culture and family. They ensure that equality is more than words, but is built into existence for all. They ensure that resources are never depleted, but sustained for all time. They mandate healthy environments, nutrition and a healthful way of life, spiritually, emotionally, physically and mentally. They invest in the primacy of people, as an individual and as part of a greater collective. They recognise that health and the maintenance of health is the most fundamental investment in people's lives.

They ensure that all people have a place within Aboriginal society. They ensure that health for all is not just an unrealisable dream.

These have always been the charter for Aboriginal health. Unfortunately, the history of Australia, one of conflict, colonisation and devaluation of Aboriginal society, has served to undermine the very things that we see as fundamental to the promotion of health for our people. It is time we were able to reinstate what has always been without the threat of 'mainstreaming', governmental policy of mutual obligation and institutionalised bastardry. Until this can be achieved we will not have health for all, only health for some.

Thank You.