



**The Australian Society for Medical Research**

**Submission to:**

**House of Representatives:**

*Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs*

**Inquiry into the harmful use of alcohol in Aboriginal and Torres  
Strait Islander communities**

**April, 2014**

## **Declaration of interests**

The Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) represents members from the health and medical research sector including researchers from universities, hospitals, research institutes, medical colleges and patient groups.

Some members are recipients of funding from the Australian and/or State Government bodies, including the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), and the Australian Research Council (ARC).

ASMR receives direct funding from the NHMRC for ASMR Medical Research Week®, a public outreach program that raises public awareness of medical research in Australia.

## **The Australian Society for Medical Research**

The Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) is the peak professional body representing Australian health and medical researchers. In addition to the more than 1600 direct members, ASMR represents the sector through 53 affiliated professional societies, medical Colleges and patient groups, representing an additional 18,000 people actively involved in health and medical research. Our corporate and disease related foundation memberships bring a further 100,000 Australians with an interest in health and medical research into association with ASMR. Our mission is to foster excellence in Australian health and medical research and to promote community understanding and support through public, political and scientific advocacy.

The ASMR has an unparalleled record of investigating and quantifying the engagement and benefits of research to the Australian community and economy [1]. Furthermore, by communicating directly with key stakeholders and community groups about medical research, the ASMR has an immediate and first hand understanding of community perceptions and needs. One of the most unacceptable health issues in Australia is the disproportionate level of poor health and disease amongst Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Society strongly believes that new initiatives in health and medical research can drive the implementation of best practice to improve the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. During the 50th anniversary year of ASMR in 2011, our Society chose the theme 'Indigenous Health: Action on Prevention' to highlight the importance of research for improving the long-term health outcomes of Indigenous Australians [2].

In 2012, the ASMR conducted an Indigenous Health Forum: 'Better Health Outcomes for Mums and Bubs' [3]. This public forum explored issues surrounding women's and children's health within the context of broader health and social issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As a result, ASMR generated a set of realistic recommendations, designed to achieve better outcomes for maternal and child health [3]. In 2013, ASMR hosted an Indigenous Health Forum focussed on Healthy Ageing, and the ASMR will soon present a report and series of recommendations.

The ASMR is the unified voice for the Australian health and medical research sector, and is well positioned to submit its recommendations on the harmful use of alcohol in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

**Harmful use of alcohol in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities: What are the social and other determinants of high risk alcohol consumption? What strategies and programs are already having beneficial outcomes? What are the impacts of FASD and FAS?**

Over the past three decades, numerous research studies have documented the health status of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people [4,5]. Many of these studies have focussed on illness and the health disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Indeed, there is a large body of evidence to show that Indigenous people have the poorest health, lowest level of income/socioeconomic status and difficulty in accessing health services anywhere in Australia [6].

The burden of disease associated with the harmful use of alcohol by Indigenous Australians is almost double that of the general Australian population. While many interventions are being implemented around Australia, considerable alcohol-related harm remains.

When considering the primary actions to reduce alcohol related harm in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is important to acknowledge that there are several, community based interventions which have had tremendous impact in reducing alcohol misuse. Two-way communication by all stakeholders and implementation of evidence based strategies is critical for reducing alcohol-related harm. [7,8].

**Recommendation 1: Implement all recommendations stemming from the 2013 ASMR report “Better Health Outcomes for Mums and Bubs”.**

Primary prevention strategies aim to prevent non-drinkers from engaging in alcohol misuse, and are informed by knowledge of risk and protective factors. Existing primary prevention strategies begin with prenatal and postnatal care, and include programs that educate expectant parents [9]. This is the framework of ASMR’s 2013 report which focussed on achieving “Better Health Outcomes for Mums and Bubs” [3].

The report highlighted ten priority actions that can improve the health status of Australia’s Indigenous women and children [3]. These recommendations were formulated using evidence based research practice, and focussed on the principles of a healthy start to life. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women need to be empowered with culturally and community sensitive tools that educate about the dangers of alcohol misuse and the harm it could cause the unborn child.

Key amongst these recommendations were:

- Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with emerging Indigenous health centres in all facets of women’s health.
- Developing effective models for the transfer of knowledge and evidence in relation to Indigenous women’s and children’s health, from Elders to women and children and across society.
- Ensuring we have culturally safe and responsive maternity care, including primary birthing centres for low risk women across Australia.
- Providing low cost healthy food in both urban and remote Indigenous communities.

Establishing the early foundation for a healthy start to life will foster a positive cycle, leading to improved health awareness and understanding of the harms associated with alcohol misuse.

**Recommendation 2: Empower communities with greater autonomy to drive local initiatives that allow flexible and tailored support.**

It is clear that a ‘one size fits all’ model of prevention and intervention is not effective across the culturally diverse remote and urban Indigenous communities across Australia. However, there are several national and international examples, which exemplify how empowering local communities to drive local initiatives, unique to the groups immediate and future needs, can lead to transformational outcomes.

**Coca Cola**

A recent TED presentation by Melinda Gates from the Gates Foundation highlighted the success of Coca Cola [10], a company that has managed to deliver its product into the remotest villages of Africa, India and the Middle East. Coke recognised that the locals knew how to reach the very hard-to-serve places, their neighbours, and what motivates them to make change.

How can this example of a locally driven initiative be applied to transformational health outcomes? In the same TED-presentation, Melinda Gates uses the example of the health extension program in Ethiopia, where health clinics were more than a day’s travel for many Ethiopians. In 2003, the Government invested in training 35,000 health extension workers to deliver care directly to the people, bringing down the ratio of one worker for every 30,000 people to one worker for every 2500 people [10]. This has led to a decrease in child mortality rates of 25% between 2000 and 2008. Updated figures from a 2013 UN report show that deaths among children under the age of five have reduced by 67% since 1990 [11]. Importantly, this initiative was successful because it embraced a locally driven framework, providing a flexible and tailored healthcare system that can respond to the needs of each community.

By empowering locals with the skills and knowledge to provide the necessary care at a community level, these same people are now generating their own tailored, community health action plans.

### **LaunchPad: Sanitary pads for women**

Girls in developing countries can miss up to one week of school each month because they have their period. This usually results in girls falling behind in class, and abandoning education all together. Many of these women use kitchen sponges, old cloths, and other makeshift materials to manage their periods.

Studies demonstrate that when girls have access to sanitary products, absenteeism rates decrease dramatically. LaunchPad was developed to deliver affordable, biodegradable sanitary pads to women and girls in Sierra Leone [12]. To reach women and girls across Sierra Leone, LaunchPad trains local women to start their own businesses, selling sanitary pads. By empowering the women to sell the sanitary pads, they can develop locally driven strategies to deliver the products directly to the consumer.

### **Apunipima Cape York Health Council Baby Baskets**

Cape York, a remote peninsula in Far North Queensland, has high rates of maternal and neonatal mortality and morbidity compared to the rest of Australia [13]. In 2009, the Apunipima Cape York Health Council initiated the baby baskets program, which aimed to improve maternal and child health, by engaging women during the antenatal and postnatal period.

The women are provided with three baskets during the antenatal and postnatal period, containing items such as baby sleepers, nappies, personal hygiene items and tailored information brochures for mothers [13]. The baskets also contained fresh food vouchers to improve maternal nutritional status, and to encourage follow up antenatal visits.

The baby baskets are also an opportunity for health workers to have a conversation with pregnant women, and educate them on breastfeeding, birthing, baby care, the role of fathers, smoking and alcohol effects in pregnancy, specific health issues, such as sudden infant death syndrome, and eating well [13].

This simple yet effective program is another example of how tapping into the local knowledge and talent, and providing the appropriate funds and resources, can empower community groups to drive local health outcomes.

These are just a snapshot of how empowering local communities can drive significant change. In the context of alcohol misuse, fostering the creation of local, community-driven initiatives will result in flexible, tailored support, capable of meeting the demand of individual communities. ASMR proposes the following specific actions to facilitate the expansion of community led programs:

1. Consult with and establish a framework of community representatives, public health researchers and allied health professionals to develop a model of community-driven action
2. Prioritise support (financial and infrastructure) for community-driven initiatives to minimise alcohol misuse in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

**Recommendation 3: Engage with major sporting organisations to address how alcohol use is portrayed and managed through sport at all levels**

Sport arguably defines modern Australian culture, with major sporting events dominating the national calendar [14]. Alcohol consumption has long been associated with Australian sporting culture, whether it is spectators consuming alcohol at a sporting venue, at the local pub and at home, or participants in sporting events drinking to celebrate a victory, or the end of the regular season. Compounding this is sponsorship of major sporting bodies by the alcohol industry.

While the association of sport and alcohol cannot be directly associated with alcohol-related harm in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the push by major sporting bodies to engage young Indigenous Australians in their respective codes implies a responsibility on these sporting bodies to ensure the image they project is primarily focussed on the responsible use of alcohol.

The three major Australian sporting bodies, the AFL, NRL and Cricket Australia, all do a tremendous amount of work to provide opportunities for young Indigenous Australians to engage in sport. However, it is incumbent on them to ensure that the image of their respective organisations is free from the negative imagery associated with alcohol misuse. That is not to say that alcohol and sport should not be linked, rather that these major sporting organisations, which have become embedded into Australia's culture and identity, serve as an influential tool for promoting the responsible use of alcohol.



## **Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1:** Implement all recommendations stemming from the 2013 ASMR report “Better Health Outcomes for Mums and Bubs”.

**Recommendation 2:** Empower communities with greater autonomy to drive local initiatives that allow flexible and tailored support.

1. Consult with and establish a framework of community representatives, public health researchers and allied health professionals to develop a model of community driven action
2. Prioritise support (financial and infrastructure) for community driven initiatives to minimise alcohol misuse in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

**Recommendation 3:** Engage with major sporting organisations to address how alcohol use is portrayed and managed through sport at all levels

## Summary

The burden of disease associated with the harmful use of alcohol by Indigenous Australians is almost double that of the general Australian population. Primary prevention strategies aim to prevent non-drinkers from engaging in alcohol misuse, and are informed by knowledge of risk and protective factors. ASMR's recent recommendations [3] suggest evidence based strategies to establish the early foundation for a healthy start to life, fostering a positive cycle and leading to improved health awareness, and understanding of the harms associated with alcohol misuse.

Empowering local communities to drive local initiatives, unique to the groups immediate and future needs, can lead to transformational outcomes, particularly in the context of the harmful use of alcohol.

Sport plays an influential role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; therefore, there it is critical that the major Australian sporting organisations control portrayal of alcohol use to the public.

ASMR's recommendations represent the foundation for establishing a new culture of responsible use of alcohol. Improving health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is anticipated to take years, if not generations. Accordingly, the willingness to act on long-term commitments together with careful planning and decisions from both community and Government are vital if we are serious about improving the health and well-being of the future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

ASMR looks forward to working with all stakeholders to progress the implementation of recommendations that will improve health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



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