

Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS): Revitalising Health for All

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Background

The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) was established in Fitzroy, Australia in 1973. VAHS has offered a Comprehensive Primary Health Care (CPHC) service to Australian Aboriginal people for nearly 40 years. It has played a vital role in the Aboriginal community controlled health service sector in Victoria and Australia. VAHS is the site of this project, which sought to conduct an historical analysis of CPHC.

Aims and Objectives

This project was designed to address these questions:

- What are the key elements/characteristics of the VAHS CPHC approach?
- What are the significant factors that influenced the establishment, development and ongoing continuity of Comprehensive Primary Health Care at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service?
- What have been the benefits of establishing and delivering a Comprehensive Primary Health Care Service in Melbourne?
- How has and does VAHS work individually and collaboratively to address the other broader issues that impact on Indigenous people's health in Melbourne and Victoria?

Methods

The research process included: a review of formal and grey literature that was conducted between February 2009 and early 2010; semi-structured interviews with former and existing VAHS staff, Board members, and senior and respected community members; and a narrative and content analysis. The project sought to privilege Aboriginal knowledge and voices and to provide people with more of the 'whole story' rather than the segments of the whole. Advice and guidance was sought from others on the analysis and on the report. Capacity development occurred throughout all stages of the project.

Results

VAHS was initiated and is controlled and operated by Aboriginal people to deliver holistic, comprehensive and culturally-appropriate primary health care to the Aboriginal community. This research demonstrates the commitment to addressing the poor health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people along with a continuum of activism for the rights of Aboriginal people. It showcases examples of individual and collective activist activities and is evidence of the will and determination of Aboriginal people to change their health status and the factors that impact on that health status. Moreover, it demonstrates that Aboriginal community control, self management, rights, advocacy, social inclusion, access and equity have been central in all of VAHS's activities.

Conclusion

The project demonstrates the way that Aboriginal people have driven the CPHC agenda and addressed the issues that have surfaced in the past 40 years. It highlights key aspects in the journey and offers suggestions for the future.