

Alpurrurulam Community Wellness and Utopia Community Gardens

An evaluation of two remote community preventative health projects in the Northern Territory

About the Northern Territory Medicare Local

The Northern Territory Medicare Local (NTML) is a partnership between Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT), the Northern Territory Department of Health and the Associate Membership Committee. Central to the strategic approach of the NTML is the commitment by all members to embracing the philosophy of comprehensive Primary Health Care (PHC) and driving service delivery improvements that meet the varied needs of the diverse communities that make up the Northern Territory.

Our vision: *Improved health and wellbeing for all Territorians*

Our mission: *Leading development and coordination of an equitable, comprehensive Primary Health Care system and an engaged health workforce driven by community needs*

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Images

Front left: *Urapuntja Aged Care*

Front right: *Encouraging healthy living for children in Alpurrurulam*

Middle page: *Planting calendar from Utopia Homelands*

Northern Territory Medicare Local (NTML) acknowledges the financial and other support from the Australian Government Department of Health.

The NTML also acknowledges the traditional owners of the country on which we work and live and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures and to elders both past and present.



Background

In 2009 the Northern Territory Medicare Local (NTML) (formerly the General Practice Network Northern Territory) commenced two innovative preventative health projects in the Alpurrurulam (Lake Nash) community and Utopia (Urapuntja) Homelands. The aim of the Alpurrurulam Healthy Skin and Community Wellness Project was to increase the health and wellbeing of the Alpurrurulam Community. This was progressed through a collaborative and coordinated approach to health promotion and prevention which was informed by community health needs. Project activities have included supporting a community laundry, classroom education and implementation of a healthy snacking fridge at the community store. The Utopia Community Gardens Project was developed to address the concerns of community organisations and members regarding limited access to affordable fresh fruit and vegetables. A number of gardens were established on outstations using a community development model. In 2014 the NTML engaged the services of Human Capital Alliance (HCA) to conduct an independent evaluation on the implementation and impact of these projects.

RHD and Scabies

> Scabies is a skin infection that may lead to acute rheumatic fever (ARF)

> ARF can cause persisting heart damage, termed 'rheumatic heart disease' (RHD)

More information:
www.rhdaustralia.org.au

Aims of the Evaluation

The key evaluation questions were:

- What outcomes have been achieved – both intended and unintended?
- What are the key strengths to the project management approach and effective practices?
- What are the key lessons for future project planning in preventive health within communities?

This snapshot provides a summary of the findings.

What was involved?

Ethics approval was gained through the Central Australian Human Research Ethics Committee. Data was obtained through:

- Analysis of program plans, reports, meeting minutes, store sales reports and health indicators
- Three face-to-face visits to each community where the evaluators were supported by the sub-contracted dietitian and the NTML project manager
- Interviews with community members, health professionals, NTML employees and other key stakeholders, including health centres, schools, stores, shires, corporations and individuals that have been involved in the projects
- A focus group with the Alpururulam Healthy Lifestyle Committee.

What we learned

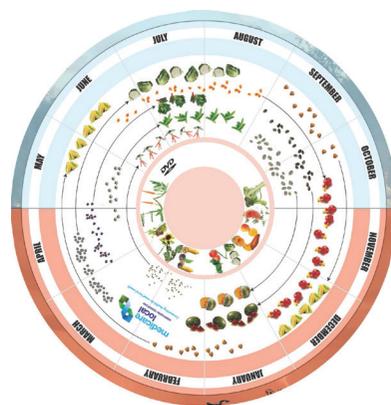
Project Achievements

Alpururulam Community

- Monthly Healthy Lifestyle Committee meetings
- Best Kept Yard Competition as part of the 'Kidney and Healthy Lifestyle Week'
- Community developed resources including posters: 'We wash ourselves everyday' and 'Our kids drink lots of water and milk'
- Community developed 'Healthy Skin DVD' including a launch at the Alpururulam School
- Development of 'Our Healthy Skin Story' with middle years students from the Alpururulam School

Utopia Homelands

- Community cooking activities using produce from the gardens
- Community developed 'Urapuntja Food Gardens' DVD featuring gardening and healthy eating education
- Development of cross-cultural planting calendars which were then produced as signs at each garden; the calendars show which seeds to plant in each season in the Utopia region



"We think the health has improved. Younger people seem much healthier and the older people are okay. Overall the skin has improved in the community."

Community member, Alpururulam

Outcomes

Alpururulam Community

- There is now a greater understanding in the community of health conditions associated with skin sores and their implications.
- Water sales at the community store increased by more than 80 per cent between 2011 and 2014, suggesting a behaviour change away from sugary drinks (although sugary drink consumption remains high).
- Health improvements in trachoma incidence are strongly suggestive of improved conditions of hygiene. Trachoma incidence decreased from seven in 2011 to zero in 2013.

Utopia Homelands

- Of the 13 gardens established, a small number of sustainable gardens have emerged.
- Crops provided a small contribution to the availability of healthy food.
- There is greater awareness of what constitutes healthy food.

Key Lessons

- Preventative health projects take time and need to be broken down into achievable and sequential steps. An approximate timeframe in this context could be five to ten years for objectives to be achieved.
- Annual project planning in the community is essential to reflect on achievements, agree on future activities including measures and to ensure community ownership.
- Obtain, analyse and report data back to the community on a regular basis. Negotiate a process for regularly obtaining data.
- Productive stakeholder relationships take significant work, persistence and flexibility. To make a difference in preventive health it is important that it includes stakeholders beyond the health sector.
- Remote community based prevention projects like these need good management and monitoring systems to ensure personnel are supported to manage project scope.
- It is vital to maintain close links between community health activities and the local health centre staff.
- Every effort must be made to support and train local community members to work in preventative health. This leads to community capacity building, culturally appropriate health messages and sustainability.
- A number of gardens function as a positive engagement tool that can break down language barriers and promote physical exercise (additional NTML observation).

How did we use the Evaluation?

Since the evaluation the NTML project manager and evaluators have visited each community to present feedback and provide a forum to discuss about future project activities. Project objectives have been adjusted to reflect realistic outcomes within the current project period. A strong focus has been on collaborating with stakeholders in each community to work towards joint outcomes or, where possible, hand over project activities. An exit strategy will be produced in consultation with all stakeholders. The aim is to further shape these projects into a sustainable model with the objective of community capacity building and improved health outcomes. The evaluation will also inform future projects.

The findings of this independent evaluation have been presented at the World Indigenous Health Conference in Cairns, 2014.

Healthy Eating and Diabetes

> There is a high prevalence of diabetes in very remote locations across Australia

> This prevalence increases with age and is higher among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

> Studies show that it is possible to prevent and control type 2 diabetes

> Prevention is possible by eating healthy food, increasing physical activity and avoiding sugary drinks

More information:
www.healthylivingnt.org.au