

The Centre for Research Excellence in Indigenous Health and Alcohol: contributions to knowledge and practice

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Introduction: There has been a critical shortage of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (First Nations Australian) researchers in the substance use and health field. This is a sensitive area, given widespread experience of stigma and of grief, trauma and loss related to substance use.

Approach: The Centre of Research Excellence in Indigenous Health and Substance Use ('the CRE') received National Health and Medical Research Council funding (2017-2023). This allowed support for First Nations Australians to build on their skills and experience, to lead research in the field.

Key Findings: The CRE supported 14 First Nations CRE members (postgraduate students, trainees and early career researchers) to design, shape or refine the focus of their projects. These projects resulted in over 50 research publications, ranging from prevention to treatment, and in settings from community to residential rehabilitation. They provided unique insights into research questions, interpretation and reporting. Their understanding of culture, history and society ensured practical relevance.

Examples of projects include the PhD work of Gemma Purcell-Khodr (with contributions from Kristie Harrison), which described how First Nations Australian staff in community controlled health services use culture in alcohol care. Annalee Stearne's PhD examined First Nations self-determination in alcohol policy in Northern Territory. In her PhD, Teagan Weatherall described prevalence of alcohol dependence in a representative community sample, and where individuals would seek help.

Discussions and Conclusions: First Nations research leadership is key to this sensitive field. Designated funding supported research career pathways and greatly increased understanding and productivity in this area.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Specific funding and structures to support First Nations Australia research workforce development can result in important progress in knowledge and practice.

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