

# POLICY OPTIONS

## Building better research partnerships by understanding how Aboriginal health communities perceive and use data: a semi structured interview study

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### Policy context

The Australian government has pledged to reduce the health disparities and to “Close the Gap” in health between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people by 2030. A key component of this initiative is advancing the understanding of physical, mental, environmental, and social determinants of Aboriginal health through focused research.

Historically, Aboriginal health research has originated from ‘outside’ the Aboriginal community, often conducted in a manner that is insensitive, inconsequential, or without explanation to Aboriginal people. This practice has left many Aboriginal people wary of research, prompting a call for more Aboriginal involvement, and control, over health research practices. Greater control is likely to empower the Aboriginal community in ways that traditional ‘top-down’ research methods cannot, building research capacity, and instilling ownership over research data. In doing so, it is likely to improve the quality and translation potential of research in Aboriginal health.

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs) are primary care service providers that are critical to improve the health of the Aboriginal people. They provide holistic care to families within a culturally appropriate context and are used by many families who find it difficult to access mainstream services. ACCHSs are, therefore, in a strategic position to facilitate research using data from their own, and external sources. Effective and sustained collaborations between the ACCHSs and non-Aboriginal researchers provides an impetus for mutual knowledge sharing that has potential to ‘close the gap’, not only in health outcomes, but in research capacity as well. However, effective research capacity building relies on a solid grasp of the importance of, and ability to use, data.

This research was based on face-to-face interviews with Aboriginal health service professionals and aimed to describe the perspectives of ACCHS’s health staff towards data and to identify potential solutions that would maximise the efficient transfer and usage of data collected through collaborative research with the ACCHSs, enhancing their capacity to effectively use research data for healthcare improvement and advocacy.

## Policy options

This is the first study investigating the perspectives of Aboriginal health professionals on data. This study highlights the importance of ensuring that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal research partnerships maintain a clear understanding of how data will be used if partnerships are to be sustained and successful. Health professionals serving the Aboriginal community view data as a resource that is crucial to the effective and efficient provision of health services, and to the funding processes by which these services are sustained. ACCHS staff members' experience with health data and their knowledge and involvement with the Aboriginal community place them in an optimal position to expand their data handling abilities to facilitate service-improving research.

Considerations for policy include:

- > Greater need for clear communication and transparency of the purposes and outcomes of data collected on Aboriginal people
  - Data collected through research must be disseminated back to the ACCHSs and should be presented in a format that is accessible and immediately comprehensible
- > Promoting research partnerships between researchers and the ACCHSs to ensure community ownership of research
- > Informing local community of data that showcases positive health gains to empower the community and support optimal health service use
- > Enabling greater use of data collected at the ACCHS for analysis to drive informed service decision-making
- > ACCHS staff members' experience with health data and their knowledge and involvement with the Aboriginal community place them in an optimal position to expand their data handling abilities to facilitate service-improving research
- > Encouraging greater data use by Aboriginal staff at ACCHSs through training to enhance their ability to conduct analyses, and use data that will instill a sense of motivation, pride and empowerment
- > Making available data on Aboriginal health from the local area as such data are often trusted more than data derived from more distal sources
- > Identifying new ways to support ACCHSs and promote strategies to improve Aboriginal research capacity and health outcomes
- > Ensuring that data collected belong to the Aboriginal community and that the findings translate into services that benefit Aboriginal people

## Key findings

- > Health professionals serving the Aboriginal community view data as a resource that is crucial to the effective and efficient provision of health services, and to the funding processes by which these services are sustained.
- > Data is viewed not only as a tool to sustain and deliver services, but also as a source of motivation, pride and empowerment
- > Many ACCHS staff are open to learning research practices that can enable greater data use, providing time burdens can be eased and training provided
- > Ability to use and access data was influenced by ACCHS staff members' job requirements and professional or tertiary-level training
- > Not all data were seen as relevant; participants felt that staff who were less aware how data was being used would place lower importance on data collection and access
- > Data collected from the participant's own ACCHS, or from the local area, were often trusted more than data derived from more distal sources
- > The findings emphasised the need for greater communication and transparency of the purposes and outcomes of data collected at ACCHSs. Data disseminated back to ACCHSs should be presented in a format that is accessible and immediately comprehensible
- > Data that demonstrated improved health outcomes within the local community positively influenced morale and motivation
- > Participants believed that data collected at the ACCHS were under-utilised and felt that further training to enhance their ability to use data would be helpful
- > Aboriginal health professionals believed that data collected from the ACCHS belong to the Aboriginal community. They urged that the results of data should be fed back in a meaningful way and translate into services that would benefit Aboriginal people

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