

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER SEXUAL HEALTH PROGRAM

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HIV/AIDS EDUCATION AND SEXUAL HEALTH PROGRAM FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PRISONERS

Introduction

This program was developed through a project undertaken jointly by the Department of Corrective Services (DCS) and Queensland Health. With such a large number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners from remote, semi-remote and regional and urban communities the DCS recognised the moral obligation to provide sexual health education to the virtual “captive audience” as at the time it was unlikely that this form of education would be provided on home communities. The program was designed very much with the “take this message home to your communities” ideology.

The information contained in the program was also intended to educate and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners to make informed decisions about risk behaviours. The Project commenced in February 1995 and was launched in December 1995.

There were approximately 800 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in secure custody in Queensland when this program was being developed. This number has increased dramatically in the past four years to over 1100 indigenous prisoners.

At the current time approximately 50% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners in Queensland are serving sentences of three years or less. All prisoners received at secure custody facilities in Queensland receive mandatory routine testing for HIV, Syphilis and Hepatitis B.

Project Funding

As funding was provided through the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sexual Health Services Funding Program with State funding being allocated by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sexual Health Unit of Queensland Health, the program was always intended to specifically target sexual health education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners.

Due to the poor education standards of a large percentage of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prison population in Queensland the format of the program was very much visual content, including video production, posters, brochures, stickers etc.

During the development of the program material it became apparent that by including non-indigenous participants in the audio visual component the program that the program could also be used as an education program for the non-indigenous prison population, a great percentage of whom also have low levels of literacy skills.

To date advice received from correctional centre management is that the program is made available to all prisoners.

The program cost approximately \$105,000 to produce. \$60,000 in salaries and oncosts, \$30,000 for video and promotional materials and \$15,000 for travel and workshop expenses.

Consultation

Prior to any work commencing on the project, the Department of Corrective Services corresponded to Correctional jurisdictions throughout Australia requesting information about any indigenous Sexual Health Program they may have developed for delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners. This consultation process then extended to numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community based organisations and government enclaves around Australia seeking information about any Sexual Health programs for indigenous people.

This consultation process also sought endorsement from other groups particularly in the areas of cultural sensitivity to sexual issues in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

It became apparent during the consultation process that there was no suitable program which could be adapted for delivery in a correctional centre environment for indigenous prisoners.

During this process by talking with community groups and prisoner groups it was obvious to be effective this program would be very visual, therefore the final result includes a combination of videos (both male and female versions), posters, stickers and brochures.

Project Development

It is interesting to note that a non-indigenous person Mr Aziz Mali who had worked for 12 months as a Sexual Health Worker on a semi remote Aboriginal community was appointed as Project Officer in early 1995 to develop and implement the project. This point is of interest due to the zeal DCS has applied to indigenous recruitment over the past eight or nine years. Aziz was successful in his application as a Custodial Officer to the Woodford Correctional Centre after his involvement with the project came to an end.

Aziz was supervised on a daily basis by Darcy Turgeon, the senior indigenous officer working for DCS at the time in the Offender Development Directorate. However, the overall responsibility for the program development rested with the DCS Consultant, Health and Medical, Doctor Tony Falconer who has been successful in recent months at implement trial placement of condom vending machines in a number of Queensland correctional facilities.

The indigenous Senior Adviser, Offender Development, DCS and the Project Officer developed the script for the video production in consultation with the Focus Video Company who were contracted to develop the video. To the credit of this organisation and its management team, a great deal of sensitivity was shown to the indigenous culture as well as to the sensitivity of the topic of the program.

From the outset the dialogue was very Murrie friendly and appropriate. The significance of the project having regard to cultural differences between indigenous and non-indigenous issues was considered at all stages of development.

A combination of graphics and music was used to make it clear that the program had been produced for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and prisoners. The graphics included in the video production are very specific, however there was no other way to get the message across.

All attempts were made to ensure the graphics reflected the distinctive style of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork as well as the clinical description of HIV/AIDS.

The video includes music tracks such as 'Safe Sex' by Brown Sugar and 'The AIDS Song' from the AIDS album. Assistance in securing this material was provided by the Brisbane Murrie Radio Station 4AAA which also promoted the program production at all stages through radio interviews which were included in the Murrie Prisoner programs.

To ensure the video component was well accepted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners, Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter were asked to act out the material talking about the HIV virus, AIDS, condom use, needle use and the use of tattoo guns in correctional centres. It was important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people featured heavily and the final production. Therefore DCS was fortunate to acquire the support of indigenous people such as Christine Anu, Cathy Freeman, Steve Renouf and Wendell Sailor.

The main health promotion messages contained in the project material were:

- That HIV/AIDS affects everyone irrespective of sexual preferences or race;
- The importance of condom use and how to use them;
- The importance of avoiding shared needles and tattoo guns;
- Individual responsibility for your own sexual health;
- The importance of taking knowledge and safer practices back to home communities following release from prison.

Implementation of the Project

Once completed, the Project material formed a package consisting of two videos (one male version and one female version), 10 Posters, 10 Brochures and 10 Stickers. Each of the components had a common Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander styled logo emphasising that individual components were part of a larger integrated package. The distinctive logo is now

The project was officially launched at the Brisbane Womens' Correctional Centre on 1 December 1995 which was also World Aids Day 1995. Brochures and stickers were freely available for prisoners to take with them to their accommodation units.

It was always going to be a challenge to ensure that the benefits of this project were ongoing following the completion of the project. Accordingly, a DCS Policy was developed and approved stipulating that the Project Video had to be shown to all prisoners at the time of induction to Correctional Centres. This should ensure that all prisoners will see this video at least once during their sentence.

The completed package was also marketed throughout interstate Correctional Jurisdictions, Juvenile Detention Centres and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Medical Services. Approximately 40 packages were sold at cost price to these agencies. State Health was also provided with a large number of packages for distribution through their networks.

Evaluation of the Project

Although it was difficult to determine the effectiveness of the program it was possible to ensure that all indigenous prisoners had access to the material through the endorsement of the DCS Policy which stipulates to all Queensland correctional centres that all prisoners must view the video as part of the induction process.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy Unit of the DCS is responsible for program development and delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners. Therefore the Unit regularly corresponds to correctional centres requesting current reports giving information about where and when the information is being accessed by prisoners.

Correctional centre management are aware of the significance of the message contained in the program about safe sexual behaviour and to date there has been total co-operation. In some correctional centres the video is constantly played through the centre Unit video systems. Prisoners are able to watch the production a number of times per day.

Ongoing Sexual Health Education for Murrie Prisoners

DCS recognised the need to have Sexual Health Workers, particularly indigenous people, visit correctional centres on a regular basis to reinforce the messages in this program to Murrie prisoners. In September 1996 workshops were held between DCS staff and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sexual Health Teams stationed throughout Queensland, to formalise agreements between the two departments to implement a visits program.

To date this has worked effectively in some areas and not so effectively in other areas. As is typical of correctional centre programs there is constant maintenance required to ensure centres remain committed to maintaining the support of outside agencies in prisoner education programs. The protocols established in 1996 are currently under review.

Phase 2

The DCS did not know in 1995 that there would be a Phase 2 of this project. However an additional \$22,000 became available from Queensland Health for additional information to indigenous prisoners about safe sexual behaviour. Due to the success of the DCS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sexual Health program it was decided to splice the original video to include a segment about safe sexual behaviour for Murrie prisoners while in custody. Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter returned to Queensland in 1998 and worked on the re-release of the video. The spliced segment lasts for approximately four minutes and includes information about sexual activity while in custody with particular reference to same sex relationships.

This segment also made specific reference to predatory behaviour and its consequences, and also contained a strong message to older Murrie prisoners to *look out* for younger Murries when they come into custody. A poster was developed to mark the re-release of the program, featuring Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter with clear messages about safe sex, the effects of alcohol consumption and substance abuse.

Summary

The development and implementation of this education program about HIV/AIDS amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners was successful because of the incredible urgency for this information to be presented in as culturally sensitive way as possible bearing in mind also the sexual explicitness of the material. When Elders in the Brisbane community were shown the video, the comments were all in favour of what the DCS was trying to do. "You had to do it" was the usual response.

The success of this initiative may just mean that a lesson learned by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander prisoner while in custody may save his or her life later on, or the life of another community person. How many of our people or other people on this planet today are saying, "If only I had used a condom". The least we could have done is to give our people that message loud and clear - safe sexual behaviour is not an option it is a necessity.

There is one Aboriginal prisoner in Queensland at the current time who is HIV positive from an indigenous prison population of in excess of 1100.

Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter did not charge for their involvement in Phase 1 and made minimal charges to DCS for their involvement in Phase 2. The remuneration paid to these two significant indigenous artists included concerts at eight correctional facilities. DCS donated 10,000 dollars to Archie and Ruby to support their tour of Cape Communities in 1997 where they performed and conducted workshops centred around alcohol abuse and violence.

Cathy Freeman, Wendell Saylor, Steve Renouf and Christine Anu gave of their time without request for payment.