CONFERENCE REPORT

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Respecting Culture and Diversity: Innovations in Healthcare service delivery

23-24 June 2005, Melbourne, Australia.

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The Australian Resource Centre for Healthcare Innovations (ARCHI) in partnership with the Centre for Culture & Health, University of New South Wales hosted this seminar on 23-24 June 2005 at the Hilton on the Park, East Melbourne, Victoria. The seminar was part of ARCHI's [Tool Kit Seminar Series](#) which provide practical advice, skills and expert opinion to assist clinical staff and health service managers. This particular seminar focused on ARCHI's aim of providing practical ideas and workable solutions for seminar participants to consider introducing into their own health care settings.

The specific aims of the seminar were to highlight strategic directions in areas related to culture and diversity in healthcare delivery, and to showcase effective models, policies, processes and innovative projects that different health care practitioners and managers have been developing within their units.

The seminar was small with approximately 80 delegates in attendance, providing the opportunity to attend all 30 sessions and discover a range of new and innovative programs and approaches. Health care workers representing a variety of health and migrant organisations presented their innovations which were often novel and sometimes simple but successful ways of addressing their particular cultural issue.

Of specific interest were the plenary speakers. On day one Professor Lesley Dwyer, the Executive Director of Patient Access and Demand Strategies from Southern Health opened the seminar with her presentation on 'Mainstreaming Cultural Diversity in Healthcare'. She promoted the idea that cultural diversity needs to become central to health planning particularly with recent research showing the impact of language fluency on health literacy. The provision of language specific correspondence for ethno-specific groups was one such initiative which is currently being trialled to improve culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) patients' attendance at clinics.

Professor Maurice Eisenbruch, Professor of Multicultural Health and Director of the Centre for Culture and Health at the University of New South Wales provided the second plenary 'Toward Cultural Competence in Australian Health Research'. He discussed the need for an evidence based research model to inform Australian health services. Currently, there is no guiding framework for culturally appropriate health care and he presented his three-tiered model as an example of moving forward on this topic. His model acknowledges the need for embedding health evidence and practice in health care to ensure health care workers honour cultural values. Professor Eisenbruch highlighted that clinicians need to develop their practice to become cultural translators which would encourage hospitals to become 'migrant friendly' instead of being "handmaidens to biomedicine".

On day two, Professor Megan-Jane Johnstone provided the most passionate of all presentations about 'Cultural safety, cultural competence and the effective delivery of culturally appropriate care to diverse populations'. Working as Professor/Director of Research at RMIT, she spoke about her research and the risk which CALD patients are exposed to from culturally inappropriate health care, and the need for new institutional processes that assure culturally safe and appropriate care to patients from CALD backgrounds. Professor Johnstone explained how such initiatives are particularly challenging when cultural diversity workers find caring for CALD patients is a more difficult task than dealing with drugs, alcohol, unemployment, child protection and gay rights. New initiatives are needed urgently to avoid potential lawsuits or accusations from CALD patients who may blame health care workers for imposing western cultural values on the CALD patient, while ignoring other traditional health beliefs.

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These plenary sessions set the scene for an inspirational and thought provoking two-day seminar. Presenters gave hopeful accounts of increasing all levels of organisational awareness about the impact of culture on health by:

- providing linguistically appropriate health care with increased interpreter services to improve health outcomes and improve patient satisfaction;
- changing processes to meet community needs which will encourage optimal health service provision;
- demonstrating that caring for CALD patients could become an issue for risk management;
- raising an awareness of the difficulties and challenges of undertaking research with CALD communities;
- identifying the need for staff training to improve the experience of CALD consumers and their health outcomes;
- revealing that culturally appropriate health services are cost effective – a point which is apparently not lost on the hospital number crunchers.

A highlight for delegates was the presentation from the international guest speaker Professor Roberto Burattini from the University of Milan in Italy. He captivated most delegates with his culturally extravagant parody on Italo-Australian culture and politics. His convincing performance was an intelligent combination of academic insight and comedy which not only successfully duped many of us, but provided a terrific ice-breaker for seminar delegates.

After the comical performance, delegates were able to sit back and participate fully in the more serious side of the seminar. Perhaps the most poignant and hopeful messages impressed upon delegates were those which conveyed the idea that not only is change extraordinarily time-consuming and more importantly 'possible', but that the justification for culturally appropriate health care is valid and worthy. Research is beginning to show that it is both cost effective and that a risk management framework could avoid litigation.

This seminar is ideally suited to people working with CALD patients, and who are looking for inspiration, innovation and direction for their own health care setting.