Northern United Football Team Wellness Program: A community collaboration for the health and welfare of the Indigenous youth in the region.

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Summary

The Northern United (NU) Football Team Wellness Program identified health issues with Indigenous Football Players prior to the commencement of their season. Initially, run over one day with a full assessment and testing, in this, the third year since the inception, three assessments were undertaken at different stages of the pre-season training schedule.

The program initially addressed the needs of the senior players but in 2013, the health issues of the juniors were addressed as well as the senior players - approximately 100 players in total. A number of key stakeholders including SCU students and local health professions were engaged to discuss the needs of the players and how to better support ongoing healthcare. Players were screened for high blood glucose, diabetes, eye issues, joint mobility, scoliosis, muscle injury, lack of nutrition and diet education plus many more health issues.

The partnership was with the Meridian Health Clinic, Northern United Football Club, SCU’s Health Clinic and Gymnasium and Student Services within the on-campus clinic. Support was also received from S&N Pathology and Woolworths. This combined effort resulted in approximately a 30% retention of players arriving for training this season who continued to “sign on” for the NU Team.

Background

Initially, the project commenced out of alarm when a local Indigenous player died on the football field. One of the local Indigenous community leaders approached the current Director of Meridian Health and asked for assistance with the health of players. The remit was that no player was to run on the playing field or train without undergoing a health screening first. Elders from the Indigenous community and staff from the university came together to discuss what could be achieved as a united collaboration. The main aim of this project was to identify players at “risk”. While the health screenings addressed the health needs of the players, in addition, over the years, it has also addressed the needs of all those who support the players. Family members, coaches, or any person who belonged to the football club were welcome at the screening events.

The project addressed the health concerns of Indigenous Football players in relation to nutritional education, general health, muscular skeletal advice and literacy as well as a pathway for further education such as the emerging role of the Indigenous Health Workers.

Learning

The project has highlighted the opportunity to change how SCU’s Health Clinic approached student education, inter-professional learning experiences and outreach activities. Lessons learned were the need to ensure communications were clear, concise, respectful but upfront and honest. Keeping it simple, at grass roots level was imperative and building trust as a critical factor when collaborating with Indigenous communities.

Outcomes

This project achieved many results from improving cultural literacy of SCU students, breaking down cultural barriers between NU Football and SCU staff and students to overall improvement of health and
wellbeing for the Indigenous players. It has facilitated conversations in regards to educational pathways for Indigenous through the local TAFE and recognition of prior learning into University. This is an ongoing part of the schools activities and curriculum development with the Indigenous community now acting as a reference group across a range of other Clinic activities. As a result of the health screens this year, 13 Indigenous players were referred to or attended the clinic independently to receive 26 free appointments at different disciplines. This would not normally be on offer without the collaboration of the two entities. In addition, there was 30% retention of players arriving for training for the last season who continued to “sign on” for the NU Team. This service also provided 84 Indigenous people with diabetes checks and from this 70 had their gate pass refunded.

Other outcomes have been the invitation of the SCU Health Clinic as one of the sponsors for the Aboriginal Rugby League “Timber Cup” between North v South on 8th June and the inclusion and invitation for the SCU Health Clinic to participate in Indigenous health matters.

**Impact**

Based on the response from the Indigenous community, Indigenous Elders have requested a women’s program using the same model.

This project has been included in Indigenous Elder women’s aged care meetings, with discussions of a clinic at the new Goonellabah Hub and discussions of Indigenous midwifery or post natal services from the Hub under consideration.

The generation of discussion in particular of men’s health issues among young Indigenous men has been a key success of the program. It has sharpened the awareness of young men around the value of preventative health measures.

The health checks were centred on diabetes and the older Indigenous community and provided a training platform for four Indigenous health workers who worked as part of the team with a specialist Diabetes Educator.

The exposure to uniquely Indigenous health issues for SCU students has been invaluable. It has directly enriched the student learning experience.

The collaboration has generated a number of other partnering opportunities. The University’s Mobile Health Facility was used at the Aboriginal Rugby League knockout Carnival, over 2 days, to provide a range of health checks and information sessions for Indigenous community members.

A research collaborative research project with Meridian Health was developed and this has resulted in improved cultural understanding, safety, knowledge and respect between the NU football team, University and external health provider groups in the community.

**Awards Category**

Community Impact.

**Good practice principles**

Collaboration, impact, respect, trust, needs.

**Recognition**

This project was shortlisted in the Excellence in Community Engagement Awards for Community Engaged Learning in 2012.

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