

The social determinants of good health

Colleen Hayward¹

¹Edith Cowan University



Professor Colleen Hayward is a senior Noongar woman with extensive family links throughout the south-west of WA. She comes from a teaching family with both her parents and two siblings having been teachers. Her father was the first Aboriginal teacher, and principal, in WA. She is currently Head of Kurongkurl Katitjin, ECU's Centre for Indigenous Education and Research.

For more than 30 years, Colleen has provided significant input to policies and programs on a wide range of issues, reflecting the needs of minority groups at community, state and national levels. She has an extensive background in a range of areas including health, education, training, employment, housing, child protection and law and justice as well as significant experience in policy and management. In much of this work, she draws on her qualifications including Bachelor of Education (Murdoch University), Bachelor of Applied Science (Aboriginal Community Management and Development) (Curtin University), and a Post Graduate Certificate in Cross Sector Partnerships (Cambridge University).

Among her many achievements, she has been recognised for her long-standing work for and on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia by being named a finalist in the national Deadly Awards in the category of Outstanding Achievement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (2008) and by winning the 2008 National NAIDOC Aboriginal Person of the Year Award. Colleen is also a recipient (2006) of the Premier of WA's prestigious Multicultural Ambassador's Award for advancing human rights and anti-racism in the community and is the 2009 inductee into the WA Department of Education's Hall of Fame for Achievement in Aboriginal Education. In 2010 she was a member of the inaugural Executive Committee of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples.

You can appreciate the five minutes is taxing on us all. I'll begin by acknowledging that we're meeting on lands that are part of the traditional country of the people of the Noongar nation. I pay my respects to my forebears, the Noongar elders past and present who have done so much over so long and who have allowed me to model their struggle, their strategy and, above all, their integrity.

Now, you'll be pleased to know that I'm also not going to go into statistics describing our life circumstances, the life circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There are, however, a few I do need to share, the most stark of which is that of the Human Development Index. I do this not only because of its between-the-eyes impact, which I'll share shortly, but also because it effectively links health and education as key determinants. You see, the Human Development Index is an international tool that measures and ranks countries based on people's life expectancy at birth, a key health measure; the extent of their knowledge, the primary link to education; and to the gross domestic product per capita through employment which, one might say, is the mesh of both health and education, but also roping in other determinants such as housing. I should add that, in WA research, part of what was found was that the disparity in education outcomes are greater than the disparity in physical health and social and emotional wellbeing outcomes combined.

When the Human Development Index is applied to the Australian population generally, our ranking is consistently in the top four or five countries in the world. I don't know that anyone has been game enough to try to do that ranking for the non-Indigenous population of Australia, but I do know that they've done it for the reverse, that is, ranking the Indigenous population, and when that happens our ranking is 103. This, to me, is the ultimate statistic and the real reason the disparity in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia needs to be addressed.

Statistics aside, I also want to ensure that the human face is never forgotten in this consideration. When I was growing up my siblings and I were really lucky. We never had a night going to bed when we were unsafe, hungry, cold or in the elements, and yet all of us, including ongoing generations, have respiratory problems. So what we do, actually, will take generations to bring the extent of change that is needed. Several of us have had cancer of one form or another, with one of my brothers losing his 10-year battle with leukaemia when he was only 38.

But it is the story of my dad I want you to really hear. Dad was the first formally-trained Aboriginal teacher in this state, going on to become the first Aboriginal school principal. His last appointment was to Wiluna, almost in the centre in a community sense of WA, where he raised daily attendance rates from virtually nothing to through the roof. He recognised that kids will learn better if they're not hungry, so he introduced perhaps the first breakfast program in schools. He recognised that kids' skin health is better if they are clean, so he organised that they'd all take showers and get into fresh school uniforms when they arrived each day. He expected the kids to do well and they did, and he is still remembered in that place and everywhere else he taught.

No one could ask for more from him, but he sure should have been afforded a better level of care when he suffered a series of heart attacks soon after turning 52. First, he was misdiagnosed with the classic, you know, indigestion, and then, after having been driven the 180 clicks on unsealed road from Wiluna to Meekatharra—and I've got to say long enough ago for this not to be about anyone here—he was left unattended on a gurney in the corridor of the hospital for hours until someone recognised him as the principal of the Wiluna school, and only at that point was he given any care at all. Until that point he was just another Aboriginal man they had to deal with, eventually.

That's the image I want us all to hold over the course of this conference and beyond, not just because he was my dad, not just because he positively influenced the lives of every child he taught for more than three decades, but because every person deserves a better level of care and regard, and every person deserves better access to quality services everywhere in this great land we call the lucky country.

Thank you.

