

Indigenous health communication: the 'Strong' series

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Don has taught in the Department of Geography and Planning, University of New England and was a Project Director at the UNE Rural Development Centre. He is completing a PhD in media at Macquarie University, and holds a BA in Government and a Master of City Planning. He is a member of the Film Critics Circle of Australia and the Fundraising Institute of Australia.

This paper examines the production, distribution and impact of a series of ten Indigenous health education and promotion television programs produced by Rural Health Education Foundation, a non-profit Australian health and medical education provider. The 'Strong' series originally commenced production in 2005 and focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander maternal, infant, child and adolescent development with programs:

- 'Start Strong' (maternal and infant development) and 'Grow Strong' (ages two to five), released in 2005 and 2006
- 'Stay Strong' (ages six to twelve), 'Strong and Deadly' (ages thirteen to eighteen), released in 2008 and 2009
- 'Live Strong' (chronic disease), released in 2010.

Each program in the five-part series was produced in two versions: a health professional version and a shorter 'community' version, and include case studies of successful positive community-based health initiatives. Funding was provided by a wide range of sponsors, foundations and trusts and the Australian Government. Programs have been widely distributed by the Foundation through its own satellite television network, web-streaming and pod-casting, extensive free DVD distribution to health professionals and Indigenous communities, and through broadcasts on SBS TV, National Indigenous Television Network (NITV) and Aurora Community TV.

Specific audiences included Indigenous communities—and in particular Indigenous health workers, other health and medical professionals working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, health and medical students, as well as university and senior high school students with an interest in Australian Indigenous studies and health issues.

This paper looks at how the series was developed and in particular how it was received by the key target audiences, by examining evaluation data and audience responses. It looks at the issues of Indigenous representation on screen, how funding is provided for a non-government initiated health communications project, and the challenges of reaching Indigenous communities and the health professionals working within them, particularly those in rural and remote Australia.