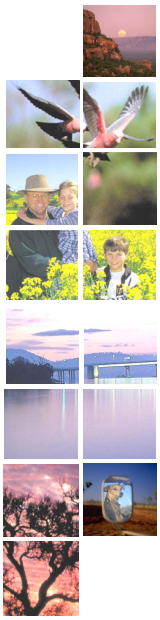
Developing a collaborative heart health project in a rural community

Kevin Rowley, The University of Melbourne, Department of Medicine, St Vincent's Hospital, Fitzroy, **Leeandra Aitken**, **Justin Mohamed**, Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative, Mooroopna, **Paul Briggs**, **Neville Atkinson**, Rumbalara Football Netball Club, Shepparton, **Rochelle Patten**, **Julie Calleja**, Viney Morgan Aboriginal Medical Service, Cummeragunja, **Vicki Atkinson**, **David Simmons**, The University of Melbourne, Department of Rural Health, Shepparton

Many factors affect heart health, including diet, exercise, smoking, access to medical care, stress and other social factors. Programs to prevent and manage heart disease need to consider all these factors in order to be effective. Our aim is to combine expertise in these areas by developing a collaborative Heart Health program that includes Indigenous community organisations and academic departments. The program design is based on the premise that ill-health among Aboriginal people has arisen from a history of colonisation, dispossession and discrimination. This history is reflected in high rates of chronic disease such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. The design also recognises the importance of self-determination as a foundation of health ("health" being defined in its broadest sense) and is based on a participatory model whereby intervention strategies are directed by community organisations.

Participating organisations include two Aboriginal medical services, an Aboriginal sporting club, and several university departments. Indigenous community organisations provide local knowledge and direction for program activities. Funding has been obtained to employ a project officer at one of these organisations. The role of the academic departments is to provide technical expertise in program design, evaluation and feedback. We are currently developing a memorandum of understanding to formalise the roles and responsibilities of each partner, and to address issues of data collection, storage and use. The research component of the Heart Health program addresses the questions of: what types of intervention strategies are effective in improving heart health in the rural Indigenous setting; and what social and environmental factors contribute to heart health and the effectiveness of interventions.