

2012

## Diversity in Health 2005: it's everybody's business

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### Recommended Citation

Spencer, C. (2006). Diversity in Health 2005: it's everybody's business. *Australasian Journal of Paramedicine*, 4(1). Retrieved from <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/jephc/vol4/iss1/15>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.  
<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/jephc/vol4/iss1/15>

CONFERENCE REPORT

Article 990176

**Diversity in Health 2005: it's everybody's business**

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**Keywords**

conference, culture, diversity, healthcare

The Australian Multicultural Foundation co-hosted this bi-annual international conference with the Diversity Health Institute and Multicultural Mental Health Australia on 17-19 October at the Hilton on the Park, East Melbourne, Victoria. The conference was touted as the most innovative multicultural health and well-being conference in Australia and attracted approximately 360 delegates, which included strong support from the political and healthcare arenas.

The specific aims of the conference were to describe the latest physical and mental health priorities related to the challenges faced by the community, carers, clinicians, service providers, planners and policy makers in their efforts to provide high quality health for Australia's multicultural community; to highlight innovative research, practices, programs, and partnerships between health management systems, providers, governments, legal systems, social service agencies and patient health status; and emphasise prevention and intervention strategies relevant to diverse cultures.

The conference began with looking at policy implications and programs in meeting the health needs of a cultural diverse Australia. The plenary speakers included The Hon Bronwyn Pike MP who shared her ideas about the local challenges for migration and health; The Hon Jeff Kennett AC who spoke passionately about mental health in a culturally diverse Australia; and Professor Rodreck Mupedzisa from the University of Zimbabwe who gave us his perspective on the universal challenges for migration and health.

These thought-provoking and contemporary plenary sessions were followed by four symposia sessions, each of which had relevance to the previous plenary sessions and conference themes. This arrangement of three plenary sessions and four symposia sessions set the scene for each subsequent day and provided delegates with the stimulation and inspiration to think creatively about diversity and health away from the unrelentingly busy workplace.

The most hopeful message came from The Anti-Racism Action Band (ARAB) called *Yallah Shabiba! (Come on young ones)* who performed as part of the official opening. ARAB, an ingenious acronym, is a unique youth performing arts project open to Arabic and non-Arabic youth and works to increase self-esteem and challenge racism among young people in Melbourne. This group of talented young performers enriched the conference theme by exploring race, cultural difference, self-confidence and the universality of friendship through

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a collaborative high energy fusion of rap, beat box, Arabic drumming, spoken word, belly dance, hip hop, video and comic monologue. Politicians, distinguished guests and conference delegates were enthralled and enthused by the youthful possibilities of what could be achieved through placing diversity as a central theme.

For me, one of the most poignant conference themes was the amount of effort that a wide ranging group of people is undertaking to effect slow change for under-represented and marginal groups. These issues are not new, but increased migration, particularly within refugee communities, is changing global demography and raising culturally specific health events to a greater level of consciousness, thus influencing the need for a better understanding about the socio-cultural influences on health as a more urgent priority. Equally urgent is the interplay between cultural diversity and mental health, which had a high profile with multicultural Mental Health Australia as one of the co-hosts. Many complex and challenging issues were raised on a constructive platform for discussion.

Finding how solutions and a better understanding is achieved is open to many ideas. Dr Choon-Siew Yong, Vice President of the Federal AMA, reported at the conference, saying that 'the concept of diversity and health remains diffuse and elusive. Everyone, it seems, has a different idea of what diversity is' (*Australian Medicine* November 7, 2005). Health in itself is a complex issue; combined with culture it becomes an increasingly complex conundrum requiring multiple approaches that, in many areas, remains unidentified. Once identified, strategies can be devised to address issues arising from a better understanding of how culture impacts on health.

I thought the strength of this conference was detailed in ethno-specific health issues, such as the story that Lorraine Boucher told, a First Nation person speaking on behalf of the Canadian North Peace Tribal Council. Her story recounted the slow death of her mother and the culturally inappropriate treatment her mother received as a result of a car accident. *Many Jurisdiction, One System* is a resourceful initiative that resulted from her experience. It is a partnership between the North Peace Tribal Council, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, Capital Health, and Health Canada. This initiative is also a clear demonstration of how one person can instigate change, and it is also a hopeful example of how partnerships between diverse organisations can work collaboratively to effect change.

Like the official opening, the official close had a hopeful and youthful end with culturally diverse singers from the Carlton Primary School demonstrating difference need not be a segregator but celebrated harmoniously in song.