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Keeping it real: Virtual connection with SToP trial community navigators

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Introduction

Researchers from Telethon Kids Institute are partnering with local stakeholders and remote Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley, Western Australia (WA) to support healthy skin through the SToP (See, Treat, Prevent skin sores and scabies) Trial. The SToP trial, a collaboration between Telethon Kids Institute, Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services (KAMS), Nirrumbuk Environmental Health Services and Western Australia Country Health Services (WACHS) – Kimberley is a clustered randomised trial with a stepped-wedge design. SToP trial consultation with stakeholders and communities commenced in 2016 to proceed consenting in 2018 and trial commencement in 2019. Since that time, the SToP trial team have been conducting intermittent fieldwork in nine remote Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley (Mullane MJ et al., 2019).

Building trust and forging relationships with remote Aboriginal communities is an essential element of culturally informed, reciprocal research (D'Antoine H et al., 2019; Wright and O'Connell, 2015). Historically these relationships have been formed over-time where community members and researchers come together face to face to share their knowledge and yarn in both an informal and formal manner (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic when Aboriginal health leaders recommended a cessation to research related travel in northern WA from March 11, 2020 to prevent the incursion of COVID-19 into Aboriginal communities with health vulnerabilities, crucial face-to-face yarning (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010) was no longer possible. At the time it appeared the existing relationships with communities involved in our research (the SToP trial) would be challenging to maintain without this ability to visit the communities. Fortunately, when tested, this assumption was erroneous. Here we report the successful use of technology to bridge the inability to visit communities in 2020 due to COVID-19. The Telethon Kulunga Aboriginal Unit (Kulunga) and SToP trial team members were able to connect virtually with Community Navigators from the Dampier Peninsula communities.

Collaborating with communities

Kulunga is the core Aboriginal Unit of the Telethon Kids Institute, with team members based in Perth and Broome, WA. Kulunga assists researchers with projects to ensure culturally appropriate and safe approaches when collaborating with Aboriginal communities and community members. Resulting from networks established by Kulunga, SToP trial team members connected with Aboriginal people from the Dampier Peninsula communities of Beagle Bay, Djarindjin, Lombadina and Ardyaloon who have formed the community-based leadership Woombooriny Amboon Angarriya Partnership Initiative (WAAPI). The WAAPI initiative empowers families to improve outcomes for the Bardi and Nyul Nyul children and young people living across this West Kimberley region. The name

WAAPI means *'All People Moving Forward Together'* in the local Bardi and Nyul Nyul languages.

WAAPI's vision for the initiative is simple, yet profound:

'With respect and trust, we work in equal partnership to strengthen happy and thriving Dampier Peninsula communities where our babies, little children and youth are strong, proud, smart and healthy and connected to their family, community and culture with guidance from our Elders.'

WAAPI's Aboriginal leaders have established an Indigenous governance model for family empowerment, that is creating a powerful 'voice' to articulate a common agenda, facilitate local decision-making and ensure Aboriginal-led change. The Indigenous governance reflects family language groups and kinship systems, uniting Bardi and Nyul Nyul people to self-determine a shared vision for moving forward and working together to drive positive social change, empowerment, and transformation. The cultural strategy guiding WAAPI's priorities is shaped by their Family Cultural Framework, which sets objectives for advancing improvements in children's learning, safety, health, and wellbeing, as well as young peoples' leadership potential and access to meaningful jobs. The Framework provides the overarching story for stakeholders to align their activities and demonstrate a commitment for 'culturally competent' service delivery, engagement, and collaboration with Dampier Peninsula Aboriginal communities.

As a place-based, collective impact initiative WAAPI is enabled by a backbone support group, which includes Save The Children and Woodside, National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), Empowered Communities, Aarnja Ltd and the WA Department of Communities, Regional Services Reform. This partnership takes a holistic, community-driven, capacity building approach to creating place-based solutions for children and families – rather than simply bringing a program or service model to the region. Driving this grassroots change are the Community Navigators who are locally employed Indigenous people. As 'agents of change', they act as community connectors and important liaisons between community stakeholders and government, service providers and other organisations including, businesses and research institutions.

As a result of coaching, mentoring and technical support from Save The Children and Empowered Communities, the Community Navigators are leading their own community consultation, data collection, stakeholder engagement and co-design processes to enhance community mobilisation around key social issues as well as facilitate culturally competent, integrated and holistic service delivery. Importantly, and as a demonstration of the critical role the Community Navigators play, service providers are now consulting with the Community Navigators first to

determine how to be more effective, accessible and achieve positive outcomes, which are valued by the community.

Collaborating with WAAPI Family Committees and Local Leadership Groups, these Community Navigators are using their Indigenous governance model as a mechanism to implement solutions to social issues that the communities have determined are priorities. This has included coordinating WAAPI cultural family events, developing early years' awareness campaigns, and co-designing culturally competent parenting and family support programs and empowering, youth engagement initiatives. The emphasis of WAAPI is on developing not only a strong and coordinated Aboriginal community voice, but a multi-generational group of Aboriginal leaders committed to a future where everyone can reach their potential. WAAPI offers both a new movement for Aboriginal people to lead the way in their relationships with community, families, children and young people; and a powerful platform for Aboriginal people to 'voice' to government and share knowledge on how best to work together to accomplish the best impacts for their communities.

Connecting virtually

The initial virtual meeting using Microsoft Teams technology involved four Community Navigators and their mentor from Save the Children, three Telethon Kids Institute and five Kulunga staff members. Community Navigators joined Microsoft Teams from their respective communities and Save the Children, Kulunga and Telethon Kids Institute staff joined from their homes. Not only was this an exciting new way of communicating, it enabled existing relationships to continue to be strengthened. Importantly, the trusting and respectful relationships that had previously been established through working together 'face-to-face' on the Dampier Peninsula helped to enable a smooth transition to a new virtual connection of communicating. Initially, engagement with the Community Navigators was conducted through phone conversations to determine if they felt comfortable with the suggestion of working together 'virtually' on project planning. At first, there was some hesitancy expressed to adapt to this new practice for communication, which was mainly due to their inexperience with using online platforms. However, the Community Navigators also demonstrated a strong willingness to maintain their connections and continue to progress important work for helping their communities, which motivated them to learn new skills and make the technical adjustment.

Careful preparation was also required to ensure the Community Navigators were equipped with the appropriate technology that could facilitate the Microsoft Teams online platform for effective interactions. Moreover, certain training, technical assistance and 'test runs' were provided to strengthen the Community Navigators' capacity and confidence to adopt the new way of communicating virtually. Once the team was sufficiently set up, they readily accepted the ongoing

virtual option, viewing it as an excellent means for facilitating the planning and implementation of activities. The virtual option also helped to save expenses on fuel, accommodation and time spent travelling to and from meetings.

While researchers and Community Navigators met virtually, this collaboration kept real in the sense that SToP trial health promotion activities including a community-driven, collaborative hip hop music video to promote healthy skin and prevention of skin sores, were able to be planned and implemented. Given travel into remote communities was still restricted, keeping it real also meant conducting virtual workshops with schools, researchers and hip hop artists to write the song, that was later produced into a video by a local media company, Goolarri Media Enterprises during a WAAPI youth empowerment camp. The WAAPI youth empowerment camp coordinated by the Community Navigators brought together 40 youth, 20 local community members and volunteers across the region in collaboration with over 15 service provider organisations to support building the capacity of youth as future leaders.

Conclusion

The achievements resulting from the virtual planning process challenged assumptions as to the capacity for virtual options to support and strengthen appropriate yarning. The positive outcomes demonstrated that through culturally sensitive engagement, capacity building and technical support, the Community Navigators could easily adapt to the new technology and virtual option to continue real connections between themselves and with service providers, whilst leveraging off traditional knowledge and cultural expertise to guide culturally competent service design and delivery. While the significance of face-to-face yarning can never be overstated, having to adjust to a new way of yarning has reiterated the importance of connection, albeit virtually. Unfortunately, due to technical limitations, intermittent internet connectivity and various other challenges, there has been no opportunity to engage virtually with SToP trial communities in the East Kimberley. However, we continue to seek ways where virtual communication in these communities is possible.

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