

Issue 1, February 2018

Aboriginal Ageing

Newsletter

NeuRA talk: “Living with Dementia in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities”

Last December, Koori Dementia Care Project manager Sharon Wall was featured in the NeuRA Talks seminar series. Her presentation “Living with Dementia in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities” painted a vivid picture of not only the neurological processes behind dementia but also of the impact of culture in the Aboriginal experience of the condition.

Opening with the poem “Spiritual Song of the Aborigine”, Sharon emphasized key differences between Aboriginal and non-indigenous populations; many well-travelled listeners may not have been aware of just how important a strong relationship with ancestral land is to Aboriginal people. She also proposed a holistic approach to health recognizing physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of wellness. This concept is highlighted in the work of Aboriginal artist Mary Jane Page: she depicts the mind’s eye as pervasive even in sickness in her artistic representation of dementia, shown in header. For despite loss of memory and language skills as the disease progresses, Sharon explains, the personality of the dementia sufferer will often remain the same.

While dementia is ultimately a brain disease with genetic risk factors that we may not be able to control, with proper assessment and diagnosis followed by good care, the experience of individuals suffering from all types of dementia can be improved. Touching on findings of research demonstrating a 3 to 5X greater prevalence of dementia in Aboriginal compared to non-indigenous Australians, Sharon drove home the importance of developing dementia resources for Aboriginal communities in particular. It is our hope that the Aboriginal Ageing team will help do just that.



PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

Dementia Online Education

The health and quality of life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is threatened by high rates of dementia. Lack of awareness of what causes dementia, fear of the medical system, as well as language and cultural differences are all factors which prevent use of existing intervention services. Thus our **online solution** will be designed to increase awareness, timely diagnosis, access to care and support for those who have dementia, their families and carers. It will provide people with information to manage their own care and plan for the future care needs. This project is being coordinated by Lauren Poulos and Suwana Combo, who joined the NeuRA team in late 2017.

Contact us: aboriginalageing@neura.edu.au



For Sharon’s presentation and the NeuRA Talks seminar series: <https://talks.neura.edu.au/watch-online/>.

Yarn Ups Bring New Technology for Healthy Ageing to La Perouse and Campbelltown

Last June representatives from the Aboriginal Health and Ageing Program held a Yarn Up at Tharawal Aboriginal

Corporation Medical Service in south-west Sydney, and just this December a similar session was held at NeuRA with the La Perouse Community. The goal? To introduce programs focused on improving physical activity levels, mobility and balance, as well as cognitive function, to these local Aboriginal communities. For physical and mental wellness are interconnected; exercise promotes a healthy brain, preventing falls prevents injuries from threatening brain function and independent living, and a sharp mind makes falls less likely to occur in the first place.



Healthy body, healthy mind:

Three technology driven activities were demonstrated and discussed in the Yarn Up, each with a different area of focus. “Standing Tall” targets balance: an iPad app guides a series of gentle exercises, which increase in difficulty over time. Next, participants were invited to try “SmartStep”, which requires the user to exercise their physical and mental capacities in tandem as they strive to perform the correct step movements on a mat with the aim of improving their reaction time and processing speed via games on a screen. Finally, different cognitive training apps were shown, which allow users to focus in on their mental acuity with a series of brain training games.



These events were enjoyable, with a few laughs shared, and feedback sessions illuminated how these tools could be improved or integrated into current activities according to a range of personal preferences. Whilst self-management tools, also offering them in a social setting could encourage greater participation, and adapting the design to make it more culturally appealing could help create a more engaging and meaningful experience. As the Koori Active and Healthy Ageing Project progresses, we look forward working with these Aboriginal communities to promote healthy brain ageing.

EMERGING RESEARCH

Resilience: it may be more important than you think in the fight against dementia.

Dr Kylie Radford of NeuRA and her team have demonstrated that experiencing stress in childhood may increase the risk of developing dementia later in life. More recently, they have highlighted findings from the Koori Growing Old Well Study, which show this trend occurs only in people with poor resilience. If you consider yourself to be a strong person who easily adapts to change, is not easily discouraged, and bounces back from challenges quickly, you may be more likely to age well. Resilience might help protect against the negative ongoing effects of childhood stress and trauma, including dementia in late life.

Next Steps

On the whole older Aboriginal people are highly resilient, according to scores on the CD-RISC10 resilience scale. Nevertheless, promoting further development of resilience in this population could help prevent dementia or delay its onset. Focussing on building resilience with young people could make a significant difference in how they will experience ageing. Our research suggests that community, cultural and sporting activities have a positive link with life-long resilience.

