

# PlanHealth Pty Ltd

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Committee Secretariat  
Adult literacy and its importance  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/ Madam

I am a public health physician who has worked in Aboriginal health for the past 40 years, mostly in central Australia.

I have been particularly interested in the underlying social determinants of health and how they impact on Aboriginal populations. This has led me into identifying adult literacy as a fundamental prerequisite to improving Aboriginal health outcomes. Whilst clinical services are critically important, on their own they will not change health status, except for the control of infectious disease that has improved infant mortality.

There has been increasing emphasis in health programs on the importance of early childhood development and over the past decade or so there have been many programs developed focusing on this. However, the most important influences on the development of children are those of the parents/ carers of those children. If those carers have problems with literacy, they will not have access to this important skill enabling them to make better decisions regarding their children or themselves and their family/ community.

Currently, overwhelmingly, the provision of support to improve Indigenous adult literacy is ad hoc – often those in employment (for example, an Aboriginal health worker) can access support for improved literacy, but there is no systematic approach to addressing this problem at the population level.

In 2009, I was involved in obtaining a small grant from the Lowitja Institute to run a workshop which involved adult educator colleagues who had been involved in a population-level literacy campaign in Timor Leste. The workshop was with Aboriginal leaders to test the idea that a similar program might be adaptable to Aboriginal communities. This led to the establishment of the Literacy for Life Foundation which has overseen the rollout of the literacy campaign in several Aboriginal communities.

The attached article published in the Australian Public Health Association's newsletter, *In Touch*, outlines a population literacy campaign approach and some of the early outcomes.

An ARC grant enabled us to develop a research program assessing the impact of the campaign on a range of indicators (education, health, justice). Part of this was setting up a cross-linkage project which is continuing. This has already shown some improvement in participants engagement in the justice system. The relatively small numbers will make definitive conclusions difficult. However, if government were to make a real commitment to raising population literacy levels, the template of evaluating impact is already in place.

Whilst my experience has been with Aboriginal communities, the issue is not fundamentally different to mainstream populations. A national campaign is what is urgently needed.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely



Ben Bartlett