

# Walking together to combat chronic disease in NE Arnhem Land



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Elcho Island since 2016 – child health---chronic disease

2021-3 Evaluation of a grass roots Yolngu nutrition & lifestyle program, 'Hope for Health'

2023-5 Walking together programs - a new Yolngu-led approach to diabetes and heart health

# Key Lessons

Huge burden from diabetes & related illness

Current approaches -not working

New approaches are needed

- Listening to Yolngu voices
- *Gurrutu* –enduring relationships
- *Marngikunhamirr* – exchange knowledge
- *Gon-nyathanhamirr* –support, walking together, equal partnerships



# Why aren't things working?

**Balanda don't understand** that what they are saying is often not deeply understood by Yolngu

- New knowledge needs to be presented in Yolngu Matha language and integrated into Yolngu foundational concepts to be deeply understood
- Services not always fit for purpose b/o various reasons, including funding issues
- Policies are not effective eg school food could be much healthier, no restrictions on sugar sweetened beverages, infrastructure does not favour health

**Yolngu are not engaged** – dozens of Balanda short term 'programs.' Too many messages. Conceptual differences and many Yolngu have English as a third or fourth language. Yolngu need and want to be making decisions for themselves.

**Social determinants of health are a huge barrier** – poverty, remote NT

# Some thoughts on the solutions to the diabetes epidemic:

from our Unimelb team. 'Yolngu helping Yolngu'

- Listening through trusted relationships - strong local Yolngu voice and governance
- Yolngu want scientific knowledge presented in their language in a way that fits with their foundational concepts ie told in stories that make sense to them, so they have a deeper understanding of the causes and prevention of chronic disease. ie The 'back story'
- Use funding to maximise outcomes
- Fund, develop and sustain long term grass roots programs - Yolngu supporting Yolngu
- More doctors, nurses and Aboriginal Health workers with incentives to stay a long time
- Innovative outreach - eg health at home, medical yarn-up, cooking at home support
- Healthy affordable food, traditional food, school food, clean, cold drinking water. Nutrition focused on protein, and healthy fats (as in traditional diets). Minimise refined carbohydrates such as sugar sweetened beverages. Water fountains with free cold clean water. Healthy takeaway meals
- Things to keep active – Yolngu jobs, sports, hunting, dance, music, swimming pools, skate parks
- Sensible policies that support a long-term vision eg Senior positions are Yolngu supported by Balanda – 20 year exit plan for Balanda; restricted sugar sweetened beverages
- Not so siloed –social determinants of health. Housing is a big issue!
- Research and evaluation are vital as solutions need to be evidenced based.

# Marrtjin Limurr Rrambanjin Gungayun Yolŋu

*(Walking together to support Yolŋu)*

It is urgent to help Yolŋu mala understand that *lots* of people have Chronic Disease

There are things about their health Yolŋu don't want to talk about with Balanda health staff

Everyone sees the doctor plane going in and out too often

We want to find a way that people can have their health check ups at home instead of at the clinic

People feel stigma and shame (*gora*) going to the clinic

Yolŋu mala are struggling to access and understand their results from health checks at the clinic

We want to find ways for Yolŋu mala to access healthy *ŋatha*

Yolŋu mala often don't understand what the Balanda doctors and nurses are saying

*Why we need a new way of supporting Yolŋu mala with Diabetes in Galiwin'ku*

For better health, Yolŋu need to support Yolŋu

This is a health program being designed by Yolŋu mala

Sometimes people ignore medical advice

Very young people are getting *gugapuy rrirri*

We want to find ways of telling the whole community, *bukmak*, about good health

Sometimes people get tired of waiting at the clinic for their check-ups and medications

Adobe Acrobat Reader

People always say, "I will go to the clinic *yalala* (later)"

We need to encourage Yolŋu mala to have regular health checks

*Nobody likes to be told what  
to do, everyone likes to be  
part of the solution*