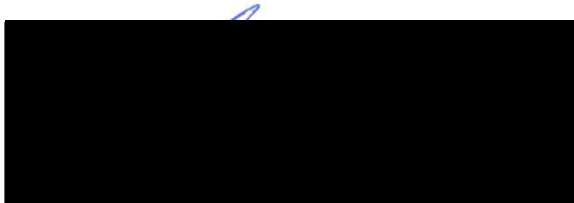




A Submission to the Parliament of Australia
House Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into
the contribution of sport to Indigenous wellbeing and mentoring

from the Rumbalara Football Netball Club Inc.
and The Kaiela Institute

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1. End of the rainbow

Rumbalara Football Netball Club was founded in the early 1970s and traces its history to the football team from Cummeragunja which fielded strong teams in the 1890s and the 1920s. It took Rumbalara (which means *end of the rainbow*) over two decades to be admitted to a football league. Over many years the club was refused entry into one sporting league after another. Eventually, the Rumbalara Football Netball Club made its way into a mainstream sporting league in 1997 and won its first premiership a year later, exactly 100 years after the first premiership was won by the community's ancestors from Cummeragunja. The Club has a pennant hanging in the clubroom — *Rumbalara: Premiers 1898 to 1998* it is a constant reminder of the club's strong links to the past.

The first premiership victory was just the beginning of Rumba's journey. Over the last fifteen years, the club has been a vibrant hub for the Goulburn Valley's Aboriginal community, a place to gather and connect through a shared passion for sport. There are currently around 440 people engaged at the club either as players or in the club's various programs, 80 per cent of whom are under the age of 25; approximately 50 people involved as coaches, team leaders, volunteers or trainers, and; over 130 paid-up social members. With the support of friends and partners like Pratt Foundation, VicHealth, Doxa Youth Foundation, Department of Human Services, The University of Melbourne, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria and many others, the community has created, in the words of co-founder John Murray, 'a place of spiritual healing'.¹

2. Empowering the Community

The history of the past 170 years has been a bleak one for the Goulburn Valley Aboriginal community. After the devastation of invasion, disease and violence, followed by forced placement onto missions and reserves, the community has strived under intense pressure to hold onto its culture and traditions. Today the community is proud, tightly knit and has a deep sense of history and shared identity, supported by connections to country. The legacy, however, of the collective trauma remains into the present. Unemployment and poor education afflict many, as do illnesses like diabetes and heart disease. Mental health is also a huge issue, with a very high incidence of depression in its many forms.

Rumbalara is committed to tackling these issues. The club is first and foremost about getting kids fitter and healthier, improving self-esteem, and reinforcing culture and identity. In response to its member's needs, the club has created programs addressing issues like youth suicide, nutrition, fitness and exercise, drugs and alcohol, employment. Other programs are concerned with issues like leadership, role models and education.

Ultimately, the club's success comes down to the fact that Rumbalara is well and truly owned by the Aboriginal community. Rumbalara's football and netball games are a place for the community to come out in force to cheer on friends and relatives, connect and be part of a proud, strong, family.

¹ Rumbalara Football Netball Club, (2010): *Proud Strong Family*, Rumbalara Football Netball Club, Carlton VIC p2.

3. Healthy relationships

Rumbalara is all about reclaiming ownership, Club President Paul Briggs asks, 'If we were autonomous and we were operating in a sense of sovereignty, how would we conduct ourselves? How do we structure ourselves so that at the very least we are looking after our kids and their cultural future?'

The club is not able to do this alone. Like any other club, Rumbalara needs the help of partners and sponsors. Over the years they have formed close relationships with a number of organisations, ranging from local community organisations like the Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative and Njernda Aboriginal Co-operative to partners like VicHealth, Doxa and State and Federal Government departments who have offered financial support and research. The club thrives on its relationships and connections, which often go far beyond funding agreements — these partners have become companions on its journey.

The Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative (which is not directly affiliated with Rumbalara Football Netball Club) has been one of the club's most important companions over the years. The Co-op is about providing support to the Aboriginal community in areas like health, housing, welfare and culture. Many of the football/netball club players and members also work for the Co-op, bringing their experiences of Aboriginal health promotion and service provision into the workings of the club and vice versa. There have been a number of partnerships between the sporting club and the Co-op, and there are sure to be more in the future.

One of the oldest and longest running of Rumbalara's other partnerships has been with the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. Since the early 1990s VicHealth has been central to the club's development, supporting many of the programs and initiatives that have made Rumbalara far more than just a sporting club. For VicHealth, the relationship has offered a chance to broaden connections with the Indigenous community and to apply a holistic approach to health promotion.

The key factor to the success and longevity of this relationship has been that over the journey VicHealth has respected the community's knowledge of its own issues and its visions for the future. VicHealth has provided funding, support and advice, backed up by solid research and long experience in health promotion without dictating to the club how to run its own agenda.

4. Building on the victories

By 1997 Rumbalara had twelve teams of netballers and footballers. It had grounds and clubrooms, and a group of dependable, inspired people providing leadership. And, most importantly, the community had rallied around the club — it had become a social hub. According to John Murray, “every game, and even training, people were coming — the uncles, cousins, they all came down together. People were coming to the club partly for the games but also to socialise with each other.”²

This was no small achievement. For years Aboriginal people had spoken, with bleak humour, about funerals being the only chance we ever got to meet up. Sport had become a kind of social glue, just as it had been in the days of Cummeragunja and the Flats, creating a space for Koori families to come together.

This achievement also created a unique opportunity. It offered the club a chance to go beyond playing football and netball, and to work towards something greater: Healing the spiritual and emotional wellbeing of the community.

The founders of the club were only too aware of the troubles faced by their community. Many of the people who played and worked at the club, as well as being active community members, had a background in health and social services. They had seen firsthand the depression, mental illness, poor physical health and untimely death that afflicted the community, the legacy of violence and trauma suffered since colonisation, the families torn apart by the Stolen Generations, and the racism that is still part of daily life.

A huge study into the mental health of Goulburn Valley’s Indigenous people, launched in the mid-1990s by a group of organisations including the Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative and the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, underlined the fact that mainstream health services had simply not worked — it concluded that the services had ‘little to offer Aboriginal people, who in turn are reluctant to use them’.³

Clearly the response needed to come from within the Aboriginal community, with an Aboriginal understanding of the issues. Rumbalara presented a unique opportunity to try to make this happen.

As President Paul Briggs puts it: “We wanted to work on the day-to-day stuff. Youth suicide, kids are at risk. Young men dying early. Drugs. Suicide. Incarceration. Unemployment. The endless cycle. We thought, the least we could do is not leave it to external partners. We can’t wait for the government to deal with youth suicide prevention, so let’s organise ourselves, so that we keep our eyes and ears

² *ibid*, p. 25

³ Woongi Cultural Healing Group 2001, *Report of the Rumbalara Aboriginal Mental Health Project*, Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative & University of Melbourne, Melbourne, p. 11

open to what's going on in our community. We get kids off the side street out of the alleys and bring them into a public place where we can see them and build relationships with them."⁴

5. Holistic health

The Club's approach to health took a new tack. For a long time attempts to address Aboriginal health and social disadvantage had focused on symptoms, rather than causes.

According to Kevin Rowley, a researcher from Onemda VicHealth Koori Health Unit at The University of Melbourne and long-time friend of Rumba, 'problems within the Aboriginal community have usually been treated with the "ambulance at the bottom of the cliff" method — trying to deal with problems after the damage has already been done'.⁵

The community, however, tends to understand health holistically. Aboriginal culture approaches health and wellbeing as being directly linked to the context of broader social issues — you cannot have healthy individuals without healthy families, without employment, or without connection to land and culture and spirituality.

In 1989 the National Aboriginal Health Strategy described Aboriginal health as involving 'not just the physical well-being of an individual but [also] the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole community...it is a whole-of-life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life'.⁶

The club takes this idea of a holistic approach as its touchstone. It is also highly compatible with their supporter, VicHealth's way of seeing things. With VicHealth, the club has created a powerful health promotion model, which uses sport as a way of empowering people to take control of their own health, as well as a way to harness the community's natural support networks.

The experience has improved VicHealth's understanding of the social determinants of health and wellbeing and the role of sport and sporting infrastructure. 'We've benefited significantly through the relationship with Rumba', says Todd Harper, VicHealth's former Chief Executive Officer. 'While the gains to the club have been substantial, it's been a privilege to support them and I suspect we've actually gained as much from the partnership as they have.'⁷

The Club's relationship with VicHealth came at a critical time. Created as part of Victoria's newly passed *Tobacco Act 1987*, VicHealth began life with a focus on reducing the impacts of smoking, primarily through social marketing campaigns like the anti-smoking billboard advertisements that made VicHealth a household name in the late 1980s. By the mid-1990s, just before the partnership with Rumbalara hit its stride, its direction was evolving. Research in health promotion had led VicHealth to become more interested in the *social determinants of health* — how factors like poverty, poor housing, limited education, social isolation, lack of community cohesion and discrimination affect health and wellbeing.

⁴ RFNC (2010), *op. cit.*, p. 26

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29

⁶ National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party (1989) A national Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party Report, Canberra, p. 28

⁷ RFNC (2010), *op. cit.*, p. 29.

This view of health is especially relevant for the club and the Aboriginal community more broadly, since so many in the community are trapped in cycles of poor health and poverty linked to generational disadvantage and a historical background of dispossession and violence.

The first joint project in 1997, called Binji Business, was about encouraging healthier eating habits, partly through helping people to grow their own food at home. But it was the Healthy Lifestyles Program, also launched in 1997, that really saw the approach find its feet. It began with a simple focus on nutrition and exercise, but became much more complex and holistic, evolving into a network of programs looking at some of the major issues affecting the community, from youth suicide and substance misuse to leadership and cultural awareness. For more than ten years, the Healthy Lifestyles Program has been a landmark both in terms of its scope and the nature of its approach. It inspired the Rumbalara medical service to be able to undertake health promotion initiatives.

The Club had a fitness and nutrition program, where they worked with a dietician and with the gyms. A small grant came from VicHealth for a Koori Mum's program, where the club worked with the International Diabetes Institute to work on designing healthier meals — the aim was to work with Indigenous women and their recipes to make them a bit healthier while staying within household budgets. On the fitness and nutrition side of things, the club ran activities like a kids' food festival, and a kids' fruit and veggie parade.

Many of the initiatives that came out of the Healthy Lifestyles Program, including the healthy dinners served up every Thursday evening after training, continue to run today.

The successes of the program were expanded by the Koori Youth Leadership Program, which began in 2002 again with VicHealth's support. This program revolved around a series of courses designed to build self-esteem and confidence in young people, as well as encouraging a culture of mentorship and role modelling within the club. Rumba's Munarra Leadership Program, initiated in 2004, continues on this path today.

Of the many things VicHealth has brought to the table, one of the most important is a commitment to research and large-scale testing, especially through the Onemda VicHealth Koori Health Unit at The University of Melbourne. Through Onemda, Rumba's programs are regularly tested for their effectiveness.

6. Women in Rumbalara

The role played by women in Rumbalara is crucial, not only in Rumba's eight successful netball teams, but also in the running of the club and its many programs and offshoots.

Many people say that a great strength of Rumbalara's is that it does not have the kind of 'blokey' culture found in most sporting clubs — women have always played an equal role in the club.

Netball teams began playing in national NAIDOC carnivals in the 1980s. The teams that formed around the selection trials in the Goulburn Valley had powerful skills. It was a great way for Aboriginal women to get together. Mothers would take to the court, there were aunties and grandmothers looking after the kids, and the kids would all get together and play. The netballers have had amazing success on the court, winning twelve premierships across eight divisions since

1997, including four A-grade premiership wins. These victories on the court provided a huge boost to the community.

The enormous personal growth of many of the players and the joy that comes from a sense of achievement as a group is addictive, and therefore people try to repeat it again, not only in their sporting lives but in other areas. It is no coincidence in the community's experience that many leaders come from sporting backgrounds.

A women's group, which is part of the club, encourages women to get together and talk while making the club's afternoon tea. Joyce Doyle is one of the key members of this group, according to her, "it's getting women to come out of the house and spend time together and talk about things like health issues, as older people in the community, mentors encourage younger people to come in and take over."⁸

7. Programs at Rumbalara

Academy of Sport, Health and Education at the University of Melbourne (ASHE)

One of Rumbalara's more ambitious projects has come through our partnership with The University of Melbourne. The Academy of Sport, Health and Education (ASHE) was designed as a way of trying to help kids through the tough years between finishing school and joining the workforce. It offers training in everything from literacy to Koori history and culture.

'Over generations Aboriginal kids have been dropping out of school at a seriously early age', says Phil Guthrie, ASHE's manager. 'ASHE's programs have been designed to get kids ready for the workforce, addressing the skill base, and confronting lifestyle challenges like drugs, alcohol and boredom.'⁹

ASHE's programs focus on education and career planning, and courses offered include Certificates II and III in Sport and Certificate IV in Community Recreation, as well as community-based short courses. ASHE had eighty-seven enrolments in 2011.

Healthy Lifestyles Program

Seeing the opportunity to increase health and nutrition awareness within the club, it began a Healthy Lifestyles program in partnership with VicHealth. This program has evolved into a broad range of health promotion activities. It currently runs the program with additional partners: the Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative, the University of Melbourne and the International Diabetes Institute.

The Healthy Lifestyle Program aims to promote healthy lifestyles, including healthy eating, exercise and strength training within the community. The program is focused on the prevention of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and social and emotional wellbeing. The Healthy Lifestyles Program also has strong links to other club projects, including the Heart Health, Youth Suicide prevention and Leadership programs, and the Academy of Sport Health and Education programs.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 22

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 35

Munarra Leadership Program

The Munarra Leadership Program is a leadership development program where participants hear from local and national leaders, undertake leadership activities and participate in cross-cultural leadership exchanges. Munarra Leadership is open to anyone in the community via merit-based applications and seeks to support people already engaged in key areas such as community development, health, education or business administration.

Beginning with on-field football and netball team leadership, the program identifies and supports our emerging leaders and resources them as they adopt a diverse range of community leadership roles. The program also provides ongoing support through networking and professional development opportunities for established community leaders. The Munarra Leadership Program received support by the Victorian Government.

My Moola

Along with the Club, the First Nations Credit Union was launched in 1999, and later evolved into the First Nations Foundation in 2006. My Moola is the First Nations Foundation financial literacy program. It allows for accessible financial literacy support for Aboriginal people.

Rumba Ripples

Rumbalara's employment program, Rumba Ripples, is designed to help Rumbalara's players enter the workforce. It provides skills training and aims to forge connections with businesses in the community. It also helps to build skills by getting people involved in TAFE courses or apprenticeships, or getting them truck licenses or forklift licenses. The idea is to get them ready so when the opportunity comes up they can get to work. It has branched outside the club and become for anyone in the community. Between 2009 and 2013 there have been 108 people placed into the workforce, with 75 jobs retained.

8. Mentors

By providing an environment where people can connect and learn from their community, the club taps into the strong culture of mentoring that is an intrinsic part of the community. It is something they have tried hard to build on.

Role modelling and mentoring happens organically at a sporting club like Rumbalara, where kids of all ages mixing with older experienced players and elders. On a game day at Rumbalara it can be seen in action — on the sidelines, groups of young people of different ages hang over the railings watching older kids strut their stuff on the oval. They absorb everything — the game play, the attitude and bearing of the players. In a recent study on leadership in the club, conducted by Onemda VicHealth Koori Health Unit, almost all the interviewees singled out older players as their biggest role models. Their status as leaders is not just about their skills on the field or the court:

'They were leaders because, again, I always look at what they do outside football, and they just did the right thing',¹⁰ says one participant in the study.

The club has worked hard on encouraging good leadership. In 2004, they launched the Munarra Leadership Program. Like its predecessor, the Koori Youth Leadership Program, it offers the chance to build personal skills, from public speaking to understanding group dynamics. It has helped many participants into full-time education or employment — no small achievement in an area where Koori unemployment is a major issue.

For Rumbalara, leadership is more than personal development and skill-building — the real hallmark of a leader is a sense of responsibility that goes beyond the individual or the family to encompass the whole community. The focus on family and leadership has been a crucial part of securing the future, both as a club and as a community. It has aided the process of passing the baton to a younger generation, which will hopefully lead with as much passion and determination as its predecessors.

Former captain Michael Chisholm believes that the next generation of people are starting to come through and take the reins at the club. "The older people are stepping back a bit and younger people are stepping up and fulfilling responsibilities, like on the board and coaching responsibilities — the next wave of leaders is coming through. It's really critical that as a club we have our own Indigenous people running the club, playing for the club and doing all the things that the club is meant to do to strengthen the community."¹¹

9. Proud. Strong. Family.

Thursday night is Rumbalara's training night. It is also the night where a cheap healthy meal is served up for everyone. These training nights, with their communal healthy dinners and relaxed atmosphere, really underline what Rumbalara has created — a place that the community can call home.

Tony Peardon, Rumbalara's treasurer, reckons that 'This is really what Rumbalara is all about. Most of the people here are related to each other in one way or another. It is one big family. This is the place we all get to come together to meet up, to find out what's going on in each other's lives.'¹²

While the majority of people at Rumbalara are Yorta Yorta, with shared roots in Cummeragunja Reserve and the Flats, Rumbalara's family is made up of people from many backgrounds. There are other Indigenous groups, like Wemba Wemba, Wiradjuri, Noongar and Torres Strait islanders, as well as a number of non-Indigenous people who work and play for the club, including some from the Pacific Islands and Malaysia.

Strengthening family structures is about helping the club and community sustain culture and traditions. Today, while elders in the community hold a strong sense of their Aboriginal identity and retain knowledge of history and culture, many younger people have to exist between two worlds. This issue is one of the big challenges faced by young Aboriginal people, according to Sharon Atkinson.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 51

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 53

¹² *ibid.*, p. 43

“There are really three tiers in the community. We’ve got the elders who are traditionally knowledgeable. Then we’ve got the middle of the rung where we’ve got a lot of young families that have been assimilated so much and their lives are too busy to really be bothered with tradition. Then we’ve got the young guys coming through suffering the identity crisis with no access to information.

“Many of us see a strengthening of family as one of the ways to mend this generation gap, allowing knowledge to be passed on. Maintaining that sense of identity has never been more important, since today many feel a powerful pressure on Koori people to conform to the dominant culture.”¹³

Rumbalara’s motto of “proud, strong family” highlights the basis of its cultural connectedness, the club has every opportunity to build on that family focus, and that is a vital asset in fortifying the culture. According to Sharon:

“Family lies at the heart of our culture — extended networks of kin have always acted as support structures, helping to maintain our culture and values.

“Traditionally, Aboriginal culture is based on socialisation, built through kinship. And it is very important to Koori culture that our social connectedness remains strong, because it’s the basis of our culture.”¹⁴

Just as importantly, Rumbalara has created a space where people feel free to express who they are.

The past couple of generations have placed a lot of pressure on families as people have moved off the missions and out of small settlements and into bigger towns like Shepparton. The tightly knit communities of the past have become harder to maintain, and today people speak about a lack of opportunities for meeting up.

This fact makes Rumba all the more important. On Saturday game days and Thursday training nights, a big section of the community comes together at the club to socialise, catch up on news and share stories. The positive effects of this are easy to imagine. Studies in Aboriginal communities underline the role of families in improving the health of our people, and globally more and more research is showing that social connectedness is a vital factor in good health for any community.

For Dallas Terlich, a non-Indigenous pastor who has long been involved with both Rumba and the community, the club’s family culture is one of Rumbalara’s biggest strengths. “What is so obvious in an Aboriginal environment is that all people, even teenage boys, love kids and embrace kids and take them under their wings and protect them”, he says. “The generational gap doesn’t exist nearly as much in an Aboriginal environment in my opinion as it does in other environments I’ve lived in.”¹⁵

Creating a positive space for young people is one of the proudest achievements as a club. Many of Rumba’s adult players look back fondly on their childhood years growing up around this environment.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.44

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 47

¹⁵ *ibid.*

10. References

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