

House of Representatives Standing Committee: Sport and Aboriginal Wellbeing

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1. You have my formal submission, submitted on 4 October 2012.

2. Research Profile:

* ANU doctorate on Aboriginal Administration in the Northern Territory, including comparative material on Queensland, awarded in 1964.. Established and directed what is now the Monash Indigenous Centre at Monash University; it has made significant contributions. Between 1964 to 1970 we published major conference proceedings as books on *Aborigines in the Economy* (1966), and *Aborigines and Education* (1969). *Better Health for Aborigines* was published in 1973.

* Published monograph *The Politics of Aboriginal Health* in 1972. From 1978 to 1984 chaired a special inquiry for the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs (Ian Viner) on the social impact of uranium mining on Aborigines in the uranium province. That issue was revisited in 2006, with publication of *Aborigines and Uranium: Measuring the Health Hazards*.

* In 1987 I published a short, first sketch called *Aborigines in Sport*. In the 1990s researched the relationship between sport and Aboriginal juvenile delinquency, published as *Aborigines: Sport, Violence and Survival*. In 1995 turned the 1987 sketch into a large 400-page volume on the history of the Aboriginal experience as experienced through the metaphor of sport:

Obstacle Race: Aborigines in Sport. Two volumes ensued from that "mother" book: *Black Diamonds* (1996) and *Black Gold* (2000).

* During the delinquency study, funded by the Criminology Research Council, it emerged that there was clearly more suicide among the young *outside* of custody than *in custody*. A further CRC grant enabled me to research youth suicide in New South Wales, the ACT and New Zealand. *Aboriginal Suicide is Different: A Portrait of Life and Self-Destruction* was published by AIATSIS in 2001, and a revised version appeared in 2005. Since then, I have written papers for conferences on sport and reconciliation, sport and health both here and abroad. You have the latest publication on 'Aborigines, Sport and Suicide' which appears in *Sport in Society* (London), October 2012.

3. Conclusions:

- * Proof is sufficient to say that where sport flourishes in Aboriginal communities, especially those remote and rural, delinquency rates drop, sometimes to almost zero. Where sport is not a presence, rates are alarmingly high.
- * Sport provides a sense of belonging, social cohesion and loyalty, almost (but not quite) a substitute for clan and kinship loyalties.
- * Sport is the **only** activity in which horizonless and otherwise purposeless youth can pit their bodies and skills against others — without having to go to school, college or apprenticeships.
- * "Football is life", a statement by a Nguiu player, is commonplace.
- * What applies to delinquency is more than likely to apply to suicide. Overseas research points strongly to sport as "protective" of suicidal ideas and behaviour.

* There is simply no evidence, at least from my work (and all coronial records in NSW) that Aboriginal youth suicide is a "biomedical" phenomenon, that is, a result of a "suicide gene", a "chemical imbalance in the brain", or "depression", however ill-defined.

* What we lack, among other things discussed below, is a formal demonstration of the effect of sport on youth suicide rates.

* Relatively inexpensive research projects can be undertaken at such at-risk locations as Mowanjum, Bunbury, Milikipati, Yirrkala, Cherbourg, Palm Island, Kempsey, Moree, Swan Hill, Framlingham, Koonibba, Port Lincoln.

* Suicide Prevention Australia, the Australian Sports Commission and other government agencies, state and federal, need involvement in measurement of a suicide-sport program, one that also addresses what you call mentoring and wellbeing. I am willing to help design such a research model. It can also be done retrospectively by looking at suicide rates where communities have or don't have sporting activity. That may be less reliable than a present tense study, but it will provide a much more comprehensive profile.

4. Barriers to Progress:

* The almost total absence of sports facilities in many remote communities like Lombardina, Doomagee, Mornington Island, Santa Teresa. Salt pans and sticks in the ground are what pass for football arena, no gyms or indoor courts. No lights, no showers, no coaches, no equipment are the order of the day.

* The presence of some playing fields but no equipment, no local organised competition, no travel money to get to competition, no sponsors, no financial resources apart from beer canteen profits.*

- * No travel money to get to any local competition and hence a resort to purely internal "house" competitions at places like Palm Island.
- * No incentives or initiatives from major corporations like Coca Cola, Cadburys, let alone liquor suppliers.
- * No short-term visits from stellar players/managers, apart from those seeking to recruit young Aborigines and Islanders.
- * Local town hostility to Aboriginal competitions, as in previous years with the NSW Aboriginal Knockout Carnival.
- * The attitudes of government agencies that sport is "merely" a weekend leisure activity that has nothing to with education, health and social issues, especially drinking, drug-taking, pack rape, forms of self harm and suicide. Ophthalmologists have demonstrated quite clearly that a chlorinated pool, however small, both alleviates and prevents trachoma, rife in remote communities.
- * A social gospel that defines sport as an activity only for athletic and muscular boys and girls. The concept of sport has to be broadened to include, sports managers and organisers, judges, referees, linesmen, scorers, record-keepers, rosette makers, jersey makers, fund-raisers, newsletter editors and reporters, photographers, trainers, first-aid people, fan clubs, fans.
- * A medical gospel that places harm to self and to others as a "mental health issue" divorced from culture, history, geography and socio-economic environments. Dr Michael Dudley, president of SPA, wrote to me this week:

"I agree with your critique of the biomedical emphasis of much contemporary psychology and psychiatry. Although I feel uncomfortable with this, knowing that there is substantial

disagreement 'within the tent', I agree entirely that the connection between sport and suicide is not generally acknowledged, and that as you suggest, research which explores this link in Australia should be undertaken and published. I will suggest that SPA makes a submission which alludes to yours and to your work in this area. We have supported and given awards to a number of indigenous sporting programs which we believe have made valuable contributions to suicide prevention — one example, 'Alive and Kicking Goals' in Broome, is presenting at our national conference in Sydney this week."

* Sport is most likely an alleviator or inhibitor of suicide, and it certainly is a major regimen for the diabetes so rampant in Aboriginal lives.