

doi: 10.1111/1753-6405.13007

Australian first in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoner health care in the Australian Capital Territory

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We read with interest the recent article entitled 'Holistic primary health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners: exploring the role of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations',¹ and wish to provide an update on an Australian first in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healthcare provision currently occurring in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).

Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services (herein Winnunga) was established in 1988 in Canberra and is the ACT's only Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHO). Winnunga aims to provide culturally safe, holistic healthcare for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of the ACT and surrounding regions and has a long history of providing healthcare and support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people incarcerated in the region. In 2007, Winnunga published a report entitled 'You do the crime, you do the time'² describing a study into a best practice model of health service delivery for incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT. This report highlighted the limited literature and information available about the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prison, as well as effective interventions to improve health and manage the cycle of incarceration. It also developed the Winnunga Holistic Health Care Prison Model for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners (herein, the Model) and their families (Figure 1).

A Phase 2 study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's needs while incarcerated was conducted by Winnunga in 2010, resulting in a report published in 2011 entitled 'We are struggling in here'.³ This report described the social and emotional needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people incarcerated in the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC). A key finding and recommendation of both

reports was the incorporation of the model into existing prison health services, in order to more appropriately address the complex social and medical needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners.

Opened in 2009, the AMC is the sole adult detention centre in the ACT. The prison caters to all security levels and was designed to be run in accordance with ACT Human Rights Standards. In 2016, Steven Freeman, a young Aboriginal man, died in custody at the AMC. "So Much Sadness in Our Lives": An Independent Inquiry into the Treatment in Custody of Steven Freeman⁴ was the resulting report from Mr Philip Moss AM, which made a number of recommendations to the ACT government. Recommendation 5 was: "that Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service (WNAHS) be integrated into the provision of health care at the AMC in order to introduce its holistic model of care to Indigenous detainees."⁴

The Inquiry concluded: "that a significant role for WNAHS is necessary ... the present limited involvement of Aboriginal-led health services in an institution with a detainee population of 25% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is not acceptable."⁴

As Pettit's article notes, Medicare access is suspended for prisoners during incarceration, as healthcare services inside prisons are provided by state and territory governments. After the Moss report was released, the ACT Government committed funding to establish an autonomous Winnunga health and wellbeing service at the AMC. In January 2019, the Winnunga AMC clinic began providing holistic health and wellbeing services to clients at the AMC. The service was planned according to the Model developed in 2007, and provides comprehensive, culturally

safe medical and nursing care, as well as a social health team whose primary role is to support the social and emotional wellbeing of detainees and their families. The aim is to eventually provide Winnunga AMC clients with the same broad suite of services that are available at the Winnunga Narrabundah site. In addition, it is hoped that providing clients with comprehensive support before and during incarceration, as well as on release, may reduce rates of recidivism.

The Winnunga AMC Health and Wellbeing Service complies with the RACGP 'Standards for health services in Australian Prisons'⁵ Nursing services are available seven days a week, from 6:30am to 8:30pm. Medical services, psychology services and the social and emotional wellbeing team services are provided during business hours, Monday to Friday. After hours' telephone on-call services are provided by the general practitioners staffing the clinic. As the AMC clinic is a direct extension of the Winnunga Narrabundah site; this allows continuity of care and services when clients are released from prison, and allows Winnunga staff to truly provide a 'wrap around' service, supporting clients in all areas of their lives. The passionate team of providers work hard to support and advocate on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and their families.

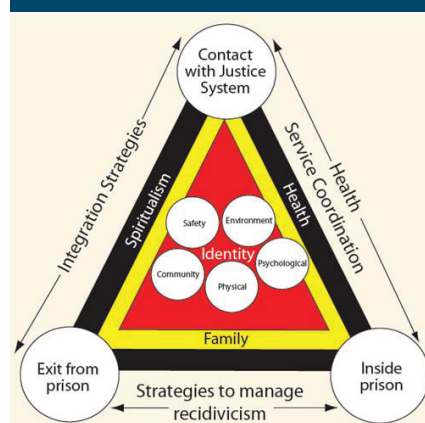
In conclusion, we are proud to provide the first report of an ACCHO providing comprehensive primary healthcare to prisoners in the ACT, and fully support Pettit's assertion that ACCHOs have an important role to play in the delivery of primary healthcare to incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

References

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Figure 1: The Winnunga Holistic Health Care Prison Model.



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