

**Healing Journeys Session**  
**IOC Conference, Melbourne**  
**14 Jan 2007**  
**Address by Penny Ramsay**

Whilst I have worked for 15 years in Aboriginal health, perhaps the most profound and challenging journey for me in this area was in 2005 when my family and I spent a year living at Galiwin'ku, a remote Aboriginal community in Arnhemland on the North Coast of Australia. There I worked as a General Practitioner with Aboriginal Health workers and nurses to provide a comprehensive primary health care service to a community of 2000 traditionally-oriented Aboriginal people known as Yolngu. It was there that I saw first hand why Aboriginal people have health comparable with many of the least resourced nations in the world in contrast to the good health of most Australians; why their life expectancy is 20 years lower the Australian average and preventable diseases are so much more common. It was there, living amongst the Yolngu, that I saw how profoundly people's health is affected by the physical and social environment. For instance, how difficult is it to eradicate scabies (a highly infectious skin disease) from a 3 bedroom house of 16 people? Or how hard is it to give up smoking if 9 out of 10 adults smoke? Underlying this challenging social environment is a history of dispossession, disempowerment and dependency on a Western system.

As a Westerner I often wondered how I could avoid perpetuating this dependency. Was I simply part of the problem? The clinic was yet another institution run in a Western way that the Yolngu now depend upon. Or could I be part of community growth and healing? As I started to see the complexity of the causes of poor health I became less inclined to naively put forward bright ideas about how to 'fix things'. After all, like most other bright ideas from outsiders they would probably have no long term effect. I realised that I needed to listen more and speak less. Real lasting improvements in health generally occur when the initiative comes from the community and is instituted in a culturally appropriate way. One of our jobs as non-indigenous Australians working in these communities is to encourage and support these initiatives, ensuring we don't hijack the project and take over. A recent example of a successful community initiative in Arnhemland is a project called "Caring for Country" in which Aboriginal people have become more active in looking after their traditional lands. Yolngu ideas of health go beyond our concept of physical, mental and social well-being to include healthy and right relationships with their traditional country, hence this project is integral to their concepts of health. Interestingly this project has resulted in marked improvements in other aspects of health also including less chronic disease, less domestic violence and improved mental health

I would have to say that the year at Elcho has been the most interesting and rewarding work I have ever done; with the variety of roles to fill. There was always plenty to do! But like most people working in these situations I often felt quite overwhelmed and ineffective. The job was enormous, the profound cultural and language differences made shared understanding about even simple things difficult, and my best laid plans for the day, such as following up people with chronic disease, or working on projects to promote health and prevent illness were often disrupted by medical emergencies, visitors or community events. How does one maintain a positive outlook and avoid

what people call burnout in the face of these pressures? One simple practice I came to rely on during the year was my jog down the airstrip at the start of each day. It was then that I laid the challenges and frustrations of the previous day before God. During these times of reflection and prayer I would almost always get a fresh perspective on each situation and move from feeling dejected and annoyed to hopeful and at peace. I realised more and more that building and working on relationships with individuals; especially those I found difficult to deal with, was a key to my effectiveness in my job.

When I reflect back on this I realise how central to the Yolngu world view relationships are. It is through a very special relationship as a family we learnt most of what we now know about Yolngu ways and developed a love and empathy for the community which takes us back there each year. On the screen is a picture of some of the Yolngu family who adopted us early in our stay. It was an immediate invitation to engage at a personal level with whole community as that relationship put us into relationship with the entire Yolngu population of East Arnhem. We suddenly had a large extended family who cared for us and kept us culturally safe. As our family became closer friends so did my commitment to the health and well-being of the community. It was a great source of energy and joy throughout our time there.

In conclusion, I believe that to be effective in working towards healing in indigenous communities we have to recognise the complexity behind the health problems as together we try to address underlying social injustice. We need to have the humility and patience to keep listening and learning from the community in which we serve, and the commitment to building personal relationships with Aboriginal people.