

MJA/Wyeth Award 2002

The 2002 MJA/Wyeth Award went to “*Sharing the true stories: improving communication between Aboriginal patients and healthcare workers*”, which was published in the 20 May 2002 issue of The Medical Journal of Australia.

At the recent AMA National Conference, Dr Alan Cass accepted the Award’s commemorative plaque from Dr Kerryn Phelps, AMA President, and a cheque for \$10 000 from Ms Erica Mann, Managing Director of Wyeth Australia.

Dr Cass and his coauthors, Anne Lowell, Michael Christie, Paul L Snelling, Melinda Flack, Betty Marrnganyin and Isaac Brown, are from the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health, Darwin. The award was for their research into factors limiting the effectiveness of health communication between Aboriginal patients and healthcare workers.

Despite the ever increasing influence of science and technology in medicine, what has remained unchanged from antiquity is the patient–doctor consultation. At its centre is effective communication, which is influenced by language, context, and culture, and no more so than in the interaction between Indigenous people and their healthcare workers.



Left to right: Dr Anne Lowell, Ms Betty Marrnganyin, Dr Martin Van Der Weyden, Dr Alan Cass, Ms Erica Mann, Dr Kerryn Phelps

As noted by Ms Mann: “Australian Indigenous culture encompasses a vast tapestry of experiences, language and mythology that both enriches our lives and presents considerable hurdles in communication about healthcare from a traditional non-Indigenous medical perspective”.

Cass and his fellow researchers set out to determine barriers that may impede this culturally laden communication, using qualitative research, which included videotaped interactions. Their research showed that, in Aboriginal healthcare, full understanding in the clinical context was rarely achieved. Barriers included lack of control by Aboriginal patients over the timing, content, and circumstances of the predominantly biomedical interactions; cultural and linguistic divides; limited use of interpreters; and lack of training opportunities in cross-cultural communications.

Commenting on the research, Ms Mann said: “There is a great and continuing need for research like this, if improvements in Aboriginal health are to be sustained and [Aboriginal Australians] are to approach the quality of life enjoyed by non-Indigenous Australians”.