

Indigenous health: tell us your story

Announcing the Dr Ross Ingram Memorial Essay Competition

NOT SO LONG AGO, we at *The Medical Journal of Australia* realised that, when it came to Indigenous health, we were great at publicising the problems. Most of the articles we publish are observational studies confirming that, yes, in health, as well as in almost every other area, Indigenous Australians are worse off than other Australians and, indeed, Indigenous populations worldwide.

We also realised that the Journal was missing an important “voice”, telling us the story of Indigenous health. Many of the people working in Indigenous healthcare do not publish in academic journals. Also, more than in some other sectors of the population, social, cultural, political and economic issues influence the health and wholeness of Indigenous people. Some of these factors cannot be explored in strict academic style.

Essays, on the other hand, leave room for the writer to analyse and interpret, often from a personal perspective and possibly including some form of narrative — “telling a story”. With this in mind, we are delighted to announce the annual Dr Ross Ingram Memorial Essay Competition for the best essay relating to Indigenous health.

The competition is open to any Indigenous person who is working, researching or training in a health-related field; we are looking for essays that present original and positive ideas aimed at promoting health gains and health equity for Australia’s Indigenous peoples. After all, real insights and solutions come from within, not from without.

The essays should be no more than 2000 words long, and must be submitted by Monday, 10 January 2005. A panel, including external experts and *MJA* editorial staff, will judge finalist essays, and judges will be blinded to the identities of the authors. The judges’ decision will be final. The winning entry will be published in the 2005 Indigenous Health issue of the Journal (the second issue in May), and the author will receive \$5000. Other essays of high merit may also be published.

We asked the members of the Australian Indigenous Doctors’ Association (AIDA) to help us name the prize and they chose to name it after Dr Ross Ingram (see Box). Ross’s story of premature death from natural causes is not an unusual one. More than half the deaths in Indigenous men occur before they reach the age of 50, compared with 13% of deaths among non-Indigenous men. The members of AIDA chose Ross not just because he was the first known Indigenous doctor to die, but because his plight typified that of many of the people currently working in Indigenous health. The human reality of statistics like those mentioned above is that Indigenous Australians inhabit a world of sickness, death and tragedy. Many of the seeds of future ill health are present from before birth. To a greater extent than most of their non-Indigenous colleagues, Indigenous doctors risk becoming a part of the problem they are trying to treat.

Ross Ingram (16 Feb 1967–15 May 2003)

Ross Ingram was an Indigenous doctor who died last year, aged 36, of cardiovascular disease. At the time of his sudden death he was working as a GP in the New South Wales rural town of Leeton.



Ross grew up in the Leeton area, where he was educated at the local primary and high schools. In 1984 he was named Young Citizen of the Year for Leeton, and in 1985, while vice-captain of Leeton High School, he received a Rotary Citizenship Award. In 1987 he was awarded a National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Award for Aboriginal Youth of the Year.

Ross was the first Indigenous person from NSW to be accepted into the University of Newcastle’s Medical School. He enrolled in 1986 and graduated in 1993, the first Wiradjuri person to become a doctor. Life and medicine took him to an internship and residency in Gosford, then general practice on the NSW central coast and in Tasmania, and finally back to practise in Wiradjuri Country (central western New South Wales). His death is the first among the small community of Indigenous doctors who have been graduating from Australian medical schools since 1984.

A keen practitioner of softball, football and cricket, as well as medicine, Ross was proud of his achievements both as a man and an Indigenous man. He is remembered by a loving family, including his wife, Julie, three children and three stepchildren.

“As Indigenous doctors, the fraternity of medicine has always accepted us wholly, and without question, and yet we are very different from so many of our non-Indigenous colleagues. Many doctors, when they look into the eyes of an Indigenous child, get a glimpse of a world they never knew existed; when we look into the eyes of that child, we see ourselves, and are reminded of the toll taken by unending stress and anxiety, and cycles of grief. For Indigenous doctors, the loss of our dear brother Ross reminds us that the privilege we enjoy as doctors does not remove our responsibilities to our people.”

— Louis Peachey, President, AIDA

We are hoping that the Dr Ross Ingram Memorial Essay Competition will provide a forum for some of the stories and ideas of Indigenous people working in Indigenous healthcare. Ross Ingram will not be able to contribute in this way, but he is a silent reminder of both the problem and the struggle of those who are working to find a solution.

We look forward to receiving your entries.

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