Why “culturally safe” health care?

Mary Belfrage

People need to feel like themselves and believe that the health care is connected to their lives.
We provided palliative care for several people, including extensive family consultation and support.

As well as these programs, we tried to visit the elderly people in their camps each week. Many of them never came to the clinic, so this was the only way they accessed health care. We were also providing acute care day to day in the clinic, which was busy in itself. We were on-call all the time, second on call to the nurse half the time. We did a weekly 150 km round-trip visit to three satellite communities. And lurking in the background were the could-happen-at-any-moment medical emergencies, which of course did happen. Together with the nurse we treated a gunshot wound to the chest (and I put in my second-ever chest tube), a ruptured ectopic pregnancy, births, cardiac emergencies, and road and various other traumas.

Although work was full-on, there was also a simplicity about our lives. I got enough sleep for the first time in years. We were absorbed by life within the community. I felt like I had time to think. I read and thought and reflected a lot. Niall and I had time to talk and didn’t have to have conversations about shopping, who’d pick up the kids, babysitting and other domestic arrangements. It was sparse and refreshing.

Under the vast sky in that uncluttered country, I connected to seasons, phases of the moon, movement of the stars. I got the kids up one night to see the Leonids, which is a meteor shower that happens to a greater or lesser extent every year in November. By luck, that year was the greatest shower in years. We lay on the trampoline and saw maybe 200 shooting stars in half an hour. It was exhilarating.

I went hunting many times with the women. As well as the time with people and experience of culture, my way of seeing the country transformed. I saw it was fecund, fertile, providing. I saw and learned how to find and collect seasonal foods — beans, potatoes, all sorts of fruits, wild honey. I ate kangaroo, turkey, echidna, witchetty grubs, the honey sac of honey ants, and goanna. I also understood that the land was knowable. That people were at home in their country, the land was steeped in the events and stories of their lives. That nomad didn’t mean moving willy-nilly around, but was actually travelling within country that was all home. That, in comparison, non-Indigenous Australians move to places we have no connection to — country, city, suburb. I learned to see things, but not everything. A close friend and I went out one day tracking goanna and I couldn’t see the tracks. I asked her to show me and she laughed and pointed. We squatted down on the ground and she pointed exactly to the tracks. I still couldn’t see anything. We just both ended up laughing and laughing — she truly disbelieving that I couldn’t see anything... and I thinking about how you can never really know what you’re not seeing.

I know we can’t change history. We can change our knowledge and understanding of it. My understanding is that many Indigenous people are sick because of the accumulated losses and trauma and now the burden of sickness and early death and the grief that comes with that. They are sick because of not having access to or not being able to or not knowing how to or not believing in the value of making life-affirming choices. I don’t believe there has yet been real political will to change the health of Indigenous people, despite there being substantial knowledge about what makes a difference. People (we) need to have a sense of power in their (our) lives, and the principle of cultural safety is fundamental to the design of services that support this. I think we understood this well enough to have been able to go to this community and provide medical and health care in a way that people found useful. It was certainly a most enriching experience for me and my family.

Competing interests
This article is based on a presentation given at an Annual Women GPs Dinner, for which I received an honorarium.

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(Received 30 Apr 2007, accepted 30 Apr 2007)