Book Review

Nurturing Aboriginal men’s health


The health of Aboriginal men is a critical issue in the discourse on Aboriginal affairs and policy. The important issues here, though, the author suggests, are not merely the biomedical aspects of health. They are the relational, social and cultural contexts and constructs of Aboriginal men’s health.

The cultural process of “nurture” or “Kanyirninpa” (holding) is part of such a construct.

Brian McCoy brings an interesting perspective as he is a Jesuit priest and an academic researcher, and has been everything from a footy coach to an Aboriginal Deaths in Custody research officer. He has spent most of the past 40 years working and living with Aboriginal people, particularly in the Western Desert where much of this book was researched.

The author addresses one of the salient issues missing in the discussion on the poor health of Aboriginal men: an approach that acknowledges the relevance of culture and accurately reflects the current health status of Aboriginal men within a broader social sphere.

He begins with a relatively dry academic style that becomes quite poignant as the nature of his research is developed. He locates his personal frame of reference, builds on his own relationships with Aboriginal people, then examines the past and recent, relevant history of the Western Desert. From there the book delves deeper, into the nature of Aboriginal male relationships and how these have been affected and what the impact has been, in terms of broad health and social and emotional wellbeing.

For those of us who work with Aboriginal people, this is an important book, and for those who don’t, and want to have a deeper intellectual understanding of Aboriginal issues, it’s a good read.

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I would describe myself as an Aboriginal man who loves being a doctor. I love working one-on-one with my patients and feel a sense of satisfaction in the knowledge that, in my own small way, the work that I do contributes towards closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health outcomes.

It was a long journey to get to where I am today. I was always interested in becoming a doctor, but I thought that it was only for “rich people” or “doctors’ kids” — not someone like me. After completing my Year 10 certificate, I became an apprentice fitter machinist in a coal mine. My dreams of becoming a doctor might have ended there had I not seen Dr Louis Peachey and Dr Sandra Eades, the first Indigenous medical graduates from the University of Newcastle, interviewed on The Ray Martin Show. On that fateful day in the 1990s, Louis and Sandra’s confidence, determination and passion made me realise that I could do it too.

My story, and those of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors like me, illustrates the importance of education, good role models and cultural safety — all the things that the Australian Indigenous Doctors’ Association continues to advocate. Today, our organisation is proud to boast of the 130 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors and a further 130 medical students around the country. These are pleasing figures, but there is still much work to do to raise them to reach parity with the proportion of doctors per head of population.

“Close the Gap” is not a mere slogan. The opportunity to contribute towards growing the next generation of Indigenous doctors is the reason I took up my current post as Associate Professor of Indigenous Health at the University of Newcastle. One of the things that I try to convey to students is the importance of an all-of-system response. In other words, we’re all in this together — it’s not just up to Indigenous people to make a difference; everyone in the health system needs to contribute to close the gap. Another important aspect is two-way respect. When health professionals go to communities, it is expected that they show respect, but it is also reasonable that community members show them respect too. I think that’s a fair starting block upon which to build relationships.

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