

Doing more to improve Indigenous health: the new NHMRC Road Map

Warwick P Anderson

New directions and prospects in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research

The NHMRC Road Map II: a strategic framework for improving the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People through research (“Road Map II”) will shortly be available from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) website and in published form. This editorial outlines new NHMRC activities for research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

The NHMRC Road Map: a strategic framework for improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health through research (“Road Map”) has been the NHMRC’s policy framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, ethics and advice since 2003. During the 2006–2009 triennium, the NHMRC Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Research Advisory Committee planned and conducted a national consultation process to evaluate the impact of the Road Map and its accompanying capacity-building activities. The evaluation process included a series of workshops held in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Alice Springs and Townsville, a written submission process, and an evaluation of NHMRC 2000–2007 funding data.

In response to outcomes from the evaluation, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Research Advisory Committee recommended that the NHMRC develop an implementation framework and communication strategy for its activities in Aboriginal health. In supporting these recommendations, the NHMRC also supported the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Research Advisory Committee to develop Road Map II.

Key features of Road Map II

Road Map II has seven “action areas” for research, developed in response to the Road Map review and targeted consultation in 2009 with peak national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative bodies.¹ These action areas will be implemented through regular consultation and negotiation with stakeholders, a triennial action plan for NHMRC activities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health supported in the NHMRC triennial strategic plan, and advice from the NHMRC Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Advisory Committee.

The first action area — improving the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in NHMRC programs — targets recruitment, participation and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all biomedical, clinical, public health, and health services research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

The second action area — capacity exchange — increases the focus on evidence translation activities. Avenues for capacity exchange will be identified in the workforce, professional and information capacity-building activities that were strategically successful aspects of the Road Map research framework.

The third action area — promotion of the NHMRC’s role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health — is aimed at research partnerships and collaborations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander communities. The NHMRC is developing a communication strategy for Road Map II research in this action area that will include podcasts and showcasing research and evidence transfer activities. These activities are aimed at supporting the research networks that are integral to the four remaining research action areas: collaborative research to support the *Close the Gap* campaign activities, evaluation research highlighting clinical outcomes and evidence gaps, intervention research to sustain health gains, and targeted calls for research. The NHMRC’s new peer review policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research is also pivotal.

New peer review policy in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research

In 2009, the NHMRC introduced a new policy for peer review in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research. The new policy takes account of all research-related activities that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander funding applicant has been involved in, and includes these as part of that applicant’s research “track record”. The new policy is intended to facilitate research opportunities for applicants with high levels of experience or long-standing involvement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health fields. It is aimed at supporting capacity exchange and capacity building in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research.

Other NHMRC support

In 2009–2012, the NHMRC will also support a study exchange program for established researchers in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. Activities supported may include participation in clinical exchanges and placements, and speaking at international events. Priority will continue to be given to research projects about interdisciplinary intervention, social interactions, role conflicts, social control, life stress, social integration, family interactions, and institutional settings that have relevance to clinical, public and health services.

The NHMRC, Health Research Council of New Zealand and Canadian Institutes of Health Research have formed the International Collaborative Indigenous Health Research Partnership. In 2009, Partnership grants supported projects investigating health literacy among Indigenous people living with cardiovascular disease, and their families and health care providers; reduction of chronic dental disease in early childhood; and how professional health education can reduce disparities in chronic disease care.²

In all funded research, the NHMRC document *Values and ethics — guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research*³ continues to have a major influence on national and international collaborations with researchers in Indigenous health. Evidence that can be translated into policy and practice is



in short supply in this area, and research must be appropriate for use in Indigenous communities. Finally, evidence and evaluation of experience and outcomes with current government interventions need to be linked, so that policy and practice continue to improve.

Prospects for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and communities have made significant investments in NHMRC research and research-related resources. In the Road Map II research framework, prospects for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers are linked to the NHMRC's success in engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In turn, health gain in communities is linked to effective research. These relationships have been highlighted for many years and, in highlighting them again now, people working in the NHMRC, research communities and the broader health sector are urged to participate in mentoring affiliations that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers. We continue to support the capacity-building activities and new peer review processes that are working well for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, and it is our sincere aim that, with support from all stakeholders, Road Map II and its accompanying capacity-building activities will lead to health gain in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Acknowledgements

Members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Advisory Committee (and the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Research Advisory Committee), the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Forum and Research Agenda Working Group, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and health researchers are acknowledged for their contribution to Road Map II and their ongoing supporting activities.

Author details

Warwick P Anderson, AM, Chief Executive Officer
National Health and Medical Research Council, Canberra, ACT.
Correspondence: warwick.anderson@nhmrc.gov.au

References

- 1 Dwyer J, Silburn K. Review of the NHMRC Road Map. Final consultation report. Canberra: National Health and Medical Research Council, 2009. http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/file/your_health/indigenous/r45_road_map_final_consultation_report.pdf (accessed Apr 2010).
- 2 International Collaborative Indigenous Health Research Partnership. 2009 successful grants. Canberra: National Health and Medical Research Council, 2009. <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/grants/apply/strategic/ici-hrp.htm> (accessed Apr 2010).
- 3 National Health and Medical Research Council. Values and ethics — guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research. Canberra: NHMRC, 2009. <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/e52syn.htm> (accessed Apr 2010).

Regina Wilson (see page 572)



(Received 8 Feb 2010, accepted 12 Apr 2010)

□

