

Breathing life into community-driven research in the Torres Strait

It is important to establish a research culture that is embraced by the community, rather than viewed with distrust

The Torres Strait islands claim a unique place in Australian cultural and political history. Most Australians have never visited the region. The Torres Strait is the only part of Australia with an international border, Papua New Guinea, and more than 95% of the Torres Strait area is water.¹ Torres Strait people have many health issues in common with Aboriginal Australians, but the background history, language and cultural settings are vastly different. The social, political and economic determinants set the undertone to the high rates of communicable and non-communicable diseases, which require exceptional resourcefulness in the face of great distances, an often-unforgiving sea, limited funds, and an overstretched health infrastructure.² The most striking feature is the power of local culture and its diversity.

The people of the Torres Strait have been the subjects of research for almost 50 years.³ It has been an especially fertile region for researchers focusing on Indigenous health, but this activity has been almost entirely driven by institutions and researchers from outside the Torres Strait.³ Local people are mostly at a loss to identify how this research has translated into better health outcomes for them. For many, research has become a dirty word; people have felt cheated. The National Health and Medical Research Council ethical guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples highlight the importance of community collaboration, cultural continuity, research capacity-building and cultural safety.^{4,5}

This is not enough. Externally based research endeavours, no matter how virtuous they may appear, usually fail to appreciate the depth of local family and island connections, the unwritten cultural responsibilities, the transgenerational obligations, and the ever-present grief of lost loved ones. In this context, future research questions must be created by local people themselves if they are to have meaning for them.⁶ The concerns raised by Torres Strait people living in the Torres Strait can only be addressed according to local time frames through locally generated solutions and results translated into local health initiatives. As such, recent calls for community-driven Torres Strait research challenge long-held mainland attitudes.⁷ As far as possible, research should be conducted using community resources, possibly with the support of relevant funding agencies and philanthropic organisations.

By nature, community-driven research takes the long view; it cannot be bound by research grant deadlines.⁶ Community people have so many competing

commitments. Such research would involve the whole community, culturally framed and multidisciplinary. Past research programs can provide a foundation, but there must be a renewed focus on translational outcomes.⁸ Torres Strait people have already shown themselves to be confident and competent researchers; some have reached senior positions in established Australian research institutions.⁹ There is no doubt that locally based Torres Strait researchers would benefit from collaboration with external researchers and research institutions, but it is now time for them to be at the helm.

A community-driven approach validates local knowledge. People working in the front line know how things work in the community and can create realistic solutions, allowing local research talent to emerge.⁹ This model may potentially create local employment, as community health workers can partner with research professionals to further develop their own research abilities and professional development opportunities.⁶ Torres Strait-based researchers can then maximise health research outcomes and translation through local traditional knowledge, as guided by elders and respected community leaders.

The long term aim is to establish a research culture that is embraced by the community, rather than viewed with suspicion. As the community faces local health issues, it seeks answers using a local approach.⁷ Ideally, non-Torres Strait Islander researchers living in the region would collaborate, support and mentor budding local researchers. The aim would be to enhance community-based expression of ideas, practical challenges and cultural perspectives that are shaped in a markedly different way from mainland Aboriginal Australian and non-Aboriginal people.

In the words of one community elder: "We have been researched to death. It is time we researched our way back to life". There is a culture shift; it is now time for Torres Strait people to take control and breathe life back into their community health and wellbeing through community-based research. This is a key part of the Torres Strait search for greater life meaning.

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