Improving Access to Universal Maternal and Child Health Services for Aboriginal Families:
Creating a Welcoming Environment

Why the Environment is Important

The environment we create for service users is equally as important as the services we provide. The environment includes the feeling you have when you approach the building, the atmosphere inside your agency, the cultural ambience, they layout and design and how the space is adorned. All of these things add up to create either a positive or negative environmental experience for consumers. 'A Welcoming Environment is evident from the moment a person arrives...'[1]

What is a Welcoming Environment?

If a space is to be 'welcoming', it must be culturally safe. Safe spaces are created when everybody is empowered to engage in a particular setting and where there is no assault, challenge or denial of identity. An unsafe space is one that excludes and isolates some people whilst privileging others. A 'welcoming environment' is one where Aboriginal families feel culturally safe to enter and participate in.

> 'Creating a...Welcoming Environment is where we as Aboriginal people do not have to give up a part of ourselves...and where we see ourselves reflected in the everyday life'...(of the organisation)   We need to make (universal maternal child health services) a natural place for Aboriginal people to be'[2]

In the Aboriginal families' engagement in Maternal and Child Health services Phase One: Draft Project Report (2015) local service providers identified three key factors associated with culturally unsafe MCH services that may negatively impact Aboriginal families, including:

1. Encountering negative attitudes and assumptions, related to MCH Nurses being judgemental and authoritarian in their approach.
2. Real or perceived fear, associated with child protection services and their boorai being taken away.
3. Sterile and unfamiliar physical environments, where the service setting and/or staff are unwelcoming.

Impact of Government Policies on Current Service Access

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers, where historically the government has implemented policies which have not recognised the needs of Aboriginal people, accessing and using the services of mainstream agencies can often be a daunting process.

Persistent cycles of grief, loss and intergenerational trauma associated with both past and present historical factors as well as lived experiences of mainstream health services, institutions and health professionals can be attributable to Aboriginal families' limited engagement with these services today. Without an adequate understanding of, and response to, this knowledge by policy makers and service providers, Aboriginal families may continue to experience wariness, anxiety and fear associated with mainstream health services[3]

Although Governments started to move away from policies that excluded Aboriginal people from many aspects of Australian life in the early 1970's, it is important for mainstream workers to understand the consequences of colonisation, government policies, practices and racism, and consider what effects this continues to have on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities today.

> Contemporary and historical factors that are inextricably connected to Aboriginal health include experiences of racism, the ongoing effects of colonisation and oppression. These factors contribute

[1] Mammel, C. (2013) Making universities more welcoming to Aboriginal peoples, University of the Fraser Valley, Canada.

[2] Thompson, S, Shahid, S., Bessarab,D., Durey,A., and Davidson,P. (2011) Not just bricks and mortar: planning hospital cancer services for Aboriginal people, Biomed Central Ltd.

[3] VACCHO (2015) Aboriginal families' engagement in Maternal and Child Health services Phase One: Project Report [draft]

to the poor health experienced by Aboriginal people. Health statistics indicate Aboriginal people are faring the worst of any group in Australia and worse than those for comparable Indigenous populations overseas[1]

The Diversity of the Aboriginal Community in Victoria
It is important to recognise the diversity of Aboriginal peoples. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients prefer to access Aboriginal-specific services as often these services are more responsive to their needs and issues because they are managed and staffed by Aboriginal people who have a greater level of understanding and empathy for their people.   However, a portion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members will access both Aboriginal-specific and universal services and a percentage (approximately one third) will chose to only access mainstream services.

How to Create a Welcoming Environment
In order to provide a culturally responsive service to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers there are some simple actions that agencies can undertake to create a more welcoming and inviting environment for community members.   A welcoming environment is evident from the moment a person arrives at an agency and is reinforced by many features of design that impact upon the atmosphere and affect service provision. Designing the built environment to reflect these different perspectives symbolises an acknowledgement of, and respect for meeting the needs of Aboriginal consumers that forms part of a healing process.   Symbols that show respect for Aboriginal culture, such as appropriate photos, flags and signage on display in both the internal and external environments of organisations is an important acknowledgement to the value and importance of Aboriginal culture. Asking Aboriginal consumers for their ideas about how to create a welcoming environment at an agency is also valuable feedback.

A Welcoming Environment is Part of the Picture
The physical environment reflecting a respect for Aboriginal cultures is only a part of the process in improving health care for Aboriginal people. Creating a *welcoming environment* may increase access to services however the service experience may not be culturally responsive leading to disengagement. Other issues such as improved communication, being family-friendly, cultural awareness training, relationships with Aboriginal-specific services and Aboriginal workers and employment of Aboriginal workers will impact on the individual's experience of the primary health care agency. Creating a Welcoming Environment should be seen as one action of a much larger systemic change process within agencies.

By undertaking the Creating a Welcoming Environment internal and external consumer audits and implementing some simple actions to address any noted gaps, an agency has an opportunity to become more culturally respectful and conducive to healing.

Project: Consumer Audits of LGA MCH Centres (Banyule/Darebin/Moreland/Nillumbik)
- MCH service decides a number of MCH centres based on total number of MCH centres across LGA. Banyule (6) Darebin (7) Moreland(7) and Nillumbik (3)
- Local Aboriginal consumer recruited in each LGA
- Consumer completes internal and external audit. Photographic evidence.
- Centre receives suggested consumer action plan and resource kit provided
- Centre implements suggested changes (as appropriate/over time-period)
- Monitoring to see if outcome of increased access/any policy changes occur (potentially over longer time-frame)

The artwork displayed on this document was developed for NEPCP by Gary Saunders, Indigital.

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[1] VACCHO (2015) Aboriginal families' engagement in Maternal and Child Health services Phase One: Project Report [draft]