

Fostering humanity

Uluru and Ayers Rock Resort played the befitting host to the DHAA Inc 2005 National Symposium under the theme, "Oral Histories: Pacific Perspectives of Indigenous Oral Health." The two-day program featured speakers from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.

By Mary Beare, RDH and Terri Slough, RDH

The foresight to host a symposium on indigenous land, about indigenous oral health issues, came from two DHAA Inc past presidents, Mary Beare and Leah Littlejohn. The delegates were the recipients of this ingenuity in the discovery of how we have progressed from our ancestors with an ability to view life through open eyes, ears, hearts and minds, but like our ancestors not focusing beyond our comfort zones.

DHAA National President, Joan James, gave a tribute of gratitude to the Pitjantjatjara people for welcoming on to their land the 100 delegates, speakers, industry leaders, friends and partners for this significant symposium. Little did we know that four distant cultures of indigenous people would experience nearly identical systemic and oral health problems as a result of social interventions of western influences, especially with their diet.

The Aboriginal people are 'soul-full' as pointed out by Associate Professor Marc Tennant, and for two days we blended with their souls to feel the depth of their struggles and triumphs. But it was Helen Tāne who validated our emotions by saying, "How can we not feel the impact of the actions of our ancestors and the decline in oral health of the indigenous people?"

We must keep in mind that the progress we make today is a direct result from yesterday's experiences. In general we look to the past to guide our direction: what worked, what didn't work. Though we can never reverse the decisions and actions we've taken before today, we can define them by the society customs and rationales of the specific point in time. Thankfully, we are able to continually adjust our approaches as new information and reasoning present through our personal experiences and those of our profession and communities.

Discoveries

The oral health of Aboriginal Australians and the Maori people of New Zealand showed very little plaque, calculus, tooth



The speakers, sponsors and the DHAA Inc. Executives at Uluru.



A tribal elder and ngangkari, Reggie.

decay or periodontal disease prior to colonisation commenced during the mid to late 1960's. Aboriginal people were drawn from their traditional culture to that of modern society. The flourishing endemic of dental caries began shortly after the introduction of foods made from processed flour and sugar, dispelling beliefs of natural immunity to dental disease.

The Aboriginals favour traditional bush medicine delivered by ngangkari, a spiritual healer trained from an early age by virtue of their calling. Nicholas Ambrose of Anangu Tours introduced Reggie, a tribal elder and ngangkari, who offered bush cat organs (raw) as a medicine of choice. Reggie's concerns of adverse health changes concur with the introduction of processed foods, alcohol, drugs



Pitjantjatjara Elder Nura Ward.

and moving away from traditional culture.

Reggie's concerns were the conclusions of all the speakers, regardless of the country, and backed by a plethora of data. Nearly half a million points of data were covered in the two days from Associate Professor Marc Tennant, the Director of the Centre for Rural and Remote Oral Health in WA (CRROH). A higher incidence of oral malignancies, periodontal disease and caries in Aboriginal people is impacted directly by their general health with higher incidences of diabetes, rheumatic fever and reduced life expectancy. Diet, access to care and an insufficient workforce are the issues being addressed for resolutions.

Social inequalities have been growing steadily over the years due to a deficit in

preventive intervention as health embeds itself as a commodity. Indigenous oral health is in despair due to a lack of resources and workforce. Sherry Saunders (RDH from British Columbia Canada), Alyson McKinlay, (RDT/RDH in Katherine area NT), Jo Reeves (RDH SA Dental Services), Helen Tāne (RDT in NZ) and Dr Deborah Miller (Outback dentistry) are five accomplished community and public health practitioners who have illuminated a path for us to follow. Their stories exude their pride as a health care provider and accomplishments in meeting the needs of the people by adapting to their culture.

Jo's work in oral health promotion across a broad range of cultures put forth a message inspired by Ann Landers, "opportunities are usually disguised as hard work, so most people don't recognise them." The tremendous shortage in the public health workforce asks us to seize the moment by taking on the challenge to reduce the number of Anangu katiti wiya - a dialect shared by Dr Deborah Miller - meaning 'people without teeth.'

Sherry's successes in tackling the high infant decay rates among First Nation families reflects a proven belief of teaching others to teach themselves. The same principles applied in Alyson's remote experiences and Helen's work within the Maori population, aimed at training Aboriginal health workers within their respective communities.

Helen Tāne, a native Maori, and Maxine Brings Him Back-Janis, a native Lakota (Sioux) American Indian, are practitioners and academics, both having attained a Master Degree in Public Health. Their achievements and distinction within University Degree programs for Dental Therapy and Dental Hygiene (respectively) position them as role models in the recruitment of indigenous people to enter into oral health careers. Dr Chris Bourke is the inaugural President of the newly formed Indigenous Dentists' Association of Australia (ADAA), which is set to lead Indigenous Australian practitioners in a collaborative recruitment effort.

Experiencing the cultures

A place name can tell a story affixed in important cultural memories. The recognised Maori name for New Zealand is still Aotearoa, meaning the Land of the

Long White Cloud. A Polynesian navigator's first sight was not of land but of a long white cloud that hovered about it. Helen Tāne showed great loyalty to her heritage in using her native dialect. Her inspiration empowered all the Kiwis up to the podium to join together in performing a traditional song.



Oglala Sioux circle dance.



Prelude to Sounds of Silence dinner.

Traditional American Indian names are spiritually divined, unique to each individual, or related to an accomplishment, rite of passage, dream or life event. Maxine's Oglala Sioux name is Brings Him Back, which means 'She walks in the traditional way.' Her entrance to the podium dressed in her full native regalia confirmed what the elders foresaw - great pride and dignity.

Maxine, entrenched in a deep understanding of native traditions and the cultural link of the past and present, blessed all in attendance with a traditional ritual, invited Joan James and Mary Beare to participate in a sacred pipe blessing ceremony and had everyone join in the traditional Oglala Sioux circle dance for a rewarding spiritual journey. Her generous nature was displayed in gift giving; pieces of her heart.

Conclusion

Peter Malcolm, the closing guest speaker, has led several memorable expeditions to Antarctica. Quite the motivational and energetic speaker accredited with finding humour in the misfortunes of life. His passion of late is his work with the Aboriginal community around Uluru having developed a youth at risk program. Nura Ward accompanied Peter to share her kindred gift as a traditional herbalist passed down from her mother. Giving first and last voice to the Pitjantjatjara people gave reverence for our visit to their land.

The symposium offered an extensive range of products and services to the delegates from the industry leaders in Australia. Sponsorship from Oral-B and Colgate Oral Care supported this initiative to assist the DHAA Inc executive to bring it to fruition. Each company donated a raffle gift and provided delegates with essential oral hygiene product updates. A Student Poster competition, sponsored by the DHAA Inc and DPL Australia, awarded Nancy Waine (University of Queensland) and Supaya Cracknell (TAFESA) complimentary registration at the DHAA Inc 2006 Symposium and a one-year liability insurance policy.

The desert promises nights of starlit skies and chilling temperatures, which was not broken on our behalf. Gunz Dental Supply assisted the Saturday Bush BBQ with warming cocktails. On the last evening, rugged up in warm clothes, over 100 delegates and partners joined in the 'Sounds of Silence' remote dinner pre-empted with a picturesque sunset viewing of Uluru and Kata-Tjuta with champagne flowing and the melody of a didgeridoo. Following dinner, in the dark of the night, we were guided around the galaxy by an astronomer and light show. It was the perfect ending to a wonderful weekend of global experiences and friendships old and new.

The DHAA Inc invites you to view more 'Reflections' on Symposium 2005 at www.dhaa.asn.au/symp2005/home.html

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