

2009 QUEENSLAND HEALTH AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE

Entry Title

The Deadly Ears Program

Award Divisions

Divisions:

Project Awards

Category:

Categories for Performance Awards

- Principal Referral and Specialist Hospital

Category for Project Awards

- Queensland Health Award for Excellence in service delivery
- Queensland Health Award for Excellence in developing beneficial partnerships
- Queensland Health Award for Excellence in improving the health and well-being of Queenslanders

Abstract

Indigenous children have the highest rates of middle ear disease in the world.

The Royal Children's Hospital's Deadly Ears program targets this issue across Queensland. The program develops partnerships with Indigenous communities and Districts. Its service model is viewed as the benchmark in Indigenous health.

Outcomes include:

- Repairing damage and restoring hearing to over 1,200 children through ENT outreach;
- Screening over 2,000 children for hearing and communication deficits;
- Accredited ear health training to over 225 people from 13 communities;
- Developing innovative tools in health promotion, screening, education and therapy;
- Developing the landmark *Deadly Ears, Deadly Kids, Deadly Communities Framework: 2009-13*, to coordinate activities across Queensland;
- Positive exposure for Queensland Health in "good news" stories.

Aim

The Deadly Ears program aims to address:

- the high rates of ear disease in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children across Queensland;

- the impacts arising from hearing loss.

Nature of the problem

The screening of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has shown they have the highest rates of middle ear disease in the world (Dunbar et al: 2385).

Chronic ear disease has a profound impact on children. It may significantly affect their subsequent adult life because the associated hearing loss can result in:

- delays in childhood development and the attainment of essential interactive skills;
- a lack of participation in schooling and the failure to obtain an education.

This then can contribute to unemployment, low self esteem, and a raft of well documented health, social and economic problems that follow.

Extent of the problem

The World Health Organisation believes that rates of chronic ear disease above 4% represent “a massive public health problem” (WHO: 11).

It is estimated that 9% of Indigenous children in Queensland suffer from hearing loss linked to ear disease (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare(1):42). This is based on self reported prevalence only, and corresponds to the national self reported hearing loss rate of 10% among Indigenous children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare(2):50). However, these numbers are significantly underestimated.

The Deadly Ears program has been screening Indigenous children across Queensland and collating the results since 2006. This data shows that the prevalence of ear health problems among Indigenous children is 53%. Worryingly, the prevalence in the 0-4 age group is 80%, while some communities showed an overall prevalence of more than 80% for children under 17 years old. Based on this evidence, there may be more than 36,000 Indigenous children across Queensland with chronic ear and hearing problems.

Strategic importance

The Deadly Ears program is unique nationally and its service model is viewed as the benchmark in Indigenous health. It began as a regional program in 2003, becoming a state-wide service in 2007.

It is now a multi-disciplinary program targeting the prevention and management of ear disease and its associated impacts. The program has compiled a comprehensive strategy that recommends actions across health, housing, education, employment, municipal services, disability services, community services and numerous other domains associated with ear health.

This strategy confirms ear disease as the most important health issue effecting Indigenous people. It aligns with the “Close the Gap” initiatives from the Commonwealth and Queensland State Governments.

Planning and implementing solutions

The Deadly Ears program is a pioneer in the development and delivery of successful Indigenous health services. It consists of five teams:

1. Community Engagement

Deadly Ears will visit a community only after being invited to do so by the community. This ensures local ownership of the process, a key element in achieving sustained health outcomes.

Community Action Plans formalise the partnership between the program and the community to improve ear health. A *Memorandum of Understanding* then locks in the ear health services provided to the community by both the Deadly Ears program and the relevant Health Service District (HSD).

2. Workforce Development

Sustainable benefits arise when communities and HSDs are able to deliver self-sufficient ear health services. This team works with all other Deadly Ears teams to improve the capacity of their partner communities and districts.

3. Health Promotion

This team raises awareness of hearing loss impacts, and educates in prevention strategies. This is tailored to the:

- Needs of Indigenous people. There are few appropriate intervention tools for Indigenous children, and so the team has developed its own. These are continuously reviewed and updated in response to current research and feedback from the community;
- Unique requirements of each community. English is often not the first or even the second language. In addition, tools that include fish and turtles are not relevant to communities from central Queensland.

4. Allied Health Services Development

The team has developed a range of screening, therapy, and educational tools for health professionals working in Indigenous ear health. These tools are the first of their kind.

5. Hospital Walkin' Country

This clinic and surgical outreach service travels to and treats children from remote communities. It requires close cooperation with ENT surgeons, nursing staff, and multi-disciplinary teams in each health service facility.

Outcomes and Evaluation

Outcomes include:

- Repairing damage and restoring hearing to over 1,200 children through Hospital Walkin' Country;
- Ear, audiological and communication screening of over 2,000 children, ensuring early intervention;
- The program is the sole provider in Queensland of accredited ear health training, delivered to 225 people from 13 Indigenous communities;
- Successful health promotion programs:
 - A six week campaign in one Indigenous community reduced ear health screening failures from 79% to 51%.
 - Positive exposure for Queensland Health in many "good news" stories, including the recent ABC's *Stateline* feature on the Festival of Binungs (Ears) in Cherbourg which promotes ear health messages to the children and families;
- Development of innovative screening, education and therapy tools, including *Deadly Talking Mornings* and the *Deadly Ears Communication Skills Screen*;
- Development and implementation of the landmark *Deadly Ears, Deadly Kids, Deadly Communities Framework: 2009-13*, which includes a comprehensive implementation plan, to govern ear health activities across Queensland.

At the conclusion of services, the program meets with each community to review outcomes. Changes and improvements are incorporated into future services, fostering continuous improvement. As a result, Deadly Ears continually attracts invitations from new communities and HSDs.

Sustaining change

Deadly Ears embeds awareness of ear disease and its impacts in the community, and develops the capacity of its workforce to address it before it becomes a chronic problem.

This ensures screening, education and referral to appropriate services continues well after Deadly Ears has worked with the communities.

Deadly Ears' work leads to significantly reduced rates of recurrent ear health problems, which could otherwise lead to permanent hearing loss. By reducing the prevalence of hearing loss:

- school attendance increases;
- educational outcomes are improved; and
- long term positive outcomes arise, like enhanced employment and positive lifestyle opportunities.

Future scope

Deadly Ears is a Queensland-wide program. It works with organisations that sit outside Queensland Health, like the Aboriginal Medical Services, Australian Hearing, and a range of State and Australian Government agencies.

The implementation of the *Deadly Ears, Deadly Kids, Deadly Communities Framework: 2009-13*, will ensure greater consistency in ear health service delivery across Queensland. It will see action in housing, education, employment, municipal services, disability services, community services and more. Furthermore, the Australian Government's membership of the Framework's Steering Committee – and its strong support for its implementation – will enable this approach to be expanded nationally.

References

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