



THE PATHWAY PROJECT: Pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Hearing Health in Far West South Australia



Jacqueline Stephens^{1,2} Amanda Machell¹ Jonathan Craig¹ Courtney Ryder¹ Hasantha Gunasekera² Susan Woolfenden³ Eng Ooi¹ Kirsten Howard² Patricia Williams⁴ Patrick Sharpe⁵

¹ College of Medicine and Public Health, Flinders University, ² Sydney School of Public Health, University of Sydney, ³ School Of Clinical Medicine, Discipline of Paediatrics, University of New South Wales, ⁴ College of Science and Engineering, Flinders University, ⁵ Far West Community Partnerships, Ceduna

Ear disease is more prevalent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Ear and hearing health services are available but difficult to access. Moving from a service-centric to a coordinated regional approach will improve the ear health referral pathway for children in remote Australia.

Background

- Rates of ear disease in First Nations children are 5 x higher than non-First Nations children.
- In 2018-19, 43% of First Nations children presented with hearing loss.
- Persistent OM lasting beyond 3 months is a critical condition contributing to hearing loss among First Nations children. Untreated ear disease can cause developmental delay and adversely impact life course trajectories.

Aim

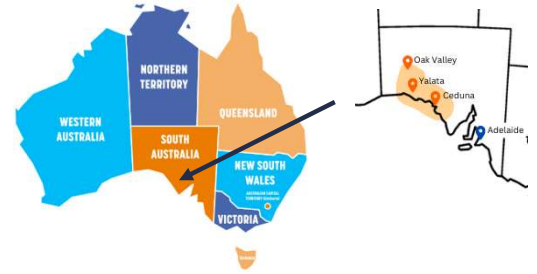
To understand the experiences of Aboriginal families and young people in accessing ear health services across the Far West region of South Australia and to co-create a strategy to improve ear health service access and delivery for First Nations children living in remote South Australia.

Community Engagement

This project arose from extensive discussions and engagement over a five-year period with members of the Far West Community of South Australia, Australia. Community identified issues included: high non-attendance rates, long waiting times for specialist appointments, fragmented service delivery, and a lack of communication between services.

Advisory Group

An Aboriginal Advisory Group has been established to provide independent input into the conduct of the project, and the interpretation and reporting of the project findings.

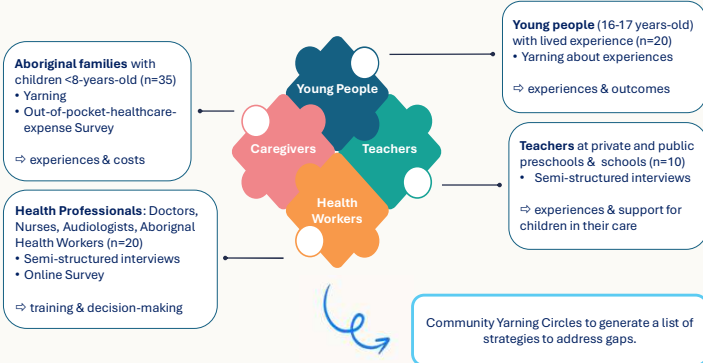


Method

Cultural Framework

Our research utilises Aboriginal Participatory Action Research to understand the experiences of families and children in the ear health patient pathway (from diagnosis through to treatment). We are working at the Aboriginal Knowledge Interface to bring together Western and Indigenous knowledges to ensure our research has Aboriginal leadership, a culturally grounded approach, respect, benefits for Community, inclusive partnerships, and transparency and evaluation.

Community Consultation



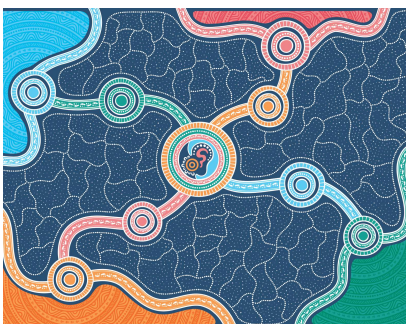
Healthcare Expenditure & Patient Journey Mapping

Mixed methods research integrating qualitative data collection methods (semi-structured interviews, yarning, and focus groups) with quantitative methods (validated surveys, economic data, hospital admission data) to develop a regional understanding of the ear health referral pathway.

Phase 1a 2024	Data collection to understand the ear health pathway.
Phase 1b 2025	Community strategy co-design to address gaps.
Phase 2 2025/26	Strategy implementation.
Phase 3 2026	Strategy evaluation.

Governance and Capacity Development

Research activity by locally employed Aboriginal Engagement Officers. Teachers and health professionals interviewed by non-Aboriginal researchers with experience in those professions. Health data extracted from Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services by local staff. Ethical approvals obtained from Aboriginal Health Research Ethics Committee, Department of Education, Flinders University, and Department of Health and Wellbeing.



Artwork

A digital artwork by Mr Jordan Lovegrove, a Ngarrindjeri young man, was commissioned to convey the purpose and intention of the Pathways Project.

The large meeting place in the centre represents the Project goal to improve the early detection and treatment of ear infections for First Nations children. The smaller meeting places throughout the artwork show different health services, clinics and hospitals across the regions, with footprints showing the journey children and their families go on to access care. The white patterns show the many different families and communities whose children go on the journey towards better ear health. The coloured pattern areas showing the better outcomes and for the children.

Expected Outcomes

The project will produce a range of outcomes including:

- A clear understanding of the gaps in ear health pathway for the children living in the Far West region.
- A clear understanding of the hidden timeframes which delay access to healthcare in the ear health referral pathway.
- An estimation of the financial out-of-pocket healthcare costs for families when accessing ear health services.
- Development of a Community specific, co-created solution.
- Increased local capacity development through employment of Aboriginal Research Officers and investment in a local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation.

Contact:

Associate Professor Jacqueline Stephens, Flinders University
Email: jacqueline.stephens@flinders.edu.au



PATHWAYS Project

pathways@flinders.edu.au

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