

# Info Sites and Clearinghouses: One Stop Shops for Local Health Information and Resources

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### **Introduction**

Since the World Wide Web was invented, many Australians have abandoned hard copy books, preferring to search for information, including health information, on the internet. This, however, has brought along its own set of issues, including the availability of a large amount of information that even the most patient user has difficulty sifting through it. By entering a phrase or topic into a search engine thousands, if not millions, of 'relevant' sites can be found. Sometimes this information is exactly what is needed, while at times much is irrelevant, confusing or even dangerously inaccurate.

Prior to the internet, libraries traditionally provided a place where people would search for hard copy paper-based information which was housed on shelves, and when required, loaned to users for a prescribed time. Computers now occupy space previously allocated to books, letting users into the world of electronic databases. This gives librarians and other users extra resources at their fingertips, but like most users of web-based resources they are faced with the dilemma of determining what is reputable and useful, and what is not. This limitation of web-based products has facilitated the growth of web librarians called 'Info' sites or 'Clearinghouses', which perform a similar

role to a librarian, providing information to users through a central location for clearly identified information.

In 2006, Hunter New England Population Health, a unit of the Hunter New England Area Health Service (HNEAHS), situated in NSW, ran a scoping project to determine what electronic information was available on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health that reflected the health of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This exercise revealed that little information on the local community was available, with information being limited to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. The search also confirmed that NSW data was inadequate to non-existent, and even more of a concern, was the lack of regional data. Within this context, the question arose, how can health services develop evidence-based services, if they cannot establish the health needs of their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population?

This 'information gap' is of particular concern to HNEAHS given that available figures indicate that the area has the highest proportion (21.4%)<sup>1</sup> of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people living in the area (compared to other area health services within NSW), and therefore it is well placed to contribute to improving the health and wellbeing of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander population of NSW.

With the exception of the widely acclaimed Western Australian National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Clearinghouse (now known as the Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet<sup>2</sup>), research also found that specialised Info sites and Clearinghouses addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health information was not widely available. While the Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet is an excellent resource with a wide range of information, resources and details relating to international, national and state issues, it does not provide what we needed – a local site to provide people in the Hunter and New England area with regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait data and information.

Given this a commitment to design, develop and maintain a

one-stop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Health Information web-based site was therefore made by Hunter New England project partners, with the aim to ensure that the site contains regional-based data and facilitates access to reputable resources, reports and information on such things as local services and community and health related activities. The site enables people to quickly find information in one location, without having to sift through the local Intranet site or web. This site is a valuable tool that is utilised by Indigenous people, health workers, policy makers, students and community members.

A grant from the University of Newcastle was applied for and awarded to establish an info site of social, health and wellbeing information for Indigenous people, and in particular, the Indigenous population of the area serviced by HNEAHS. The funding was used to employ an Applications Developer, who had particularly good skills in database development and web sites, and a Research Officer who searched for the initial literature sources for the site which became known as 'Aboriginal Health Info' site.

The Applications Developer created a web-based database which means that as long as a computer with internet access is available, and the password is known to access the database, any member of the project team can place information on the site and see it live on the internet within minutes. This means that the site can be easily maintained by the team even when away from their usual work places.

#### Aboriginal Health Info Development Partners

The project team consisting of Hunter New England Aboriginal Health, Hunter New England Population Health and Hunter New England Planning and Performance was formed to facilitate the development and maintenance of regular updates and to ensure cultural sensitivity of the resource. The team has been meeting regularly since 2008 to further improve the Aboriginal Health Info site, and members continue to work on the Info site as part of their normal role without additional resources, but with support from Hunter New England Population Planning and Performance. This collaboration has been beneficial to all groups involved, resulting in enhanced collaboration across the different units and increased personal skills, knowledge and awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues.

#### Policy Context

In developing the site, the project team was committed to ensuring that the site aligned closely with the following National, State and Area Health Service (AHS) strategic directions and related plans available at the time of development in 2008.

Close alignment to these key documents was considered

The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health 2003–2013 <sup>3</sup>	A New Direction for Hunter New England Health Service Strategic Plan Towards 2010 <sup>6</sup>
A New Direction for NSW State Health Plan. Towards 2010 <sup>4</sup>	Two Ways Together: the NSW Aboriginal Affairs Plan 2003–2012 <sup>5</sup>
Aboriginal Health Plan 2007–2011 Hunter New England Aboriginal Health Partnership <sup>7</sup>	



essential as they provide a guiding framework at a national, state and local level to: improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; build effective partnerships; increase employment opportunities and disseminate quality information. The importance of partnerships, in particular, is a common theme throughout these documents.

#### Info Site Contents

The project team developed and launched a prototype site and included the following information pages on the Hunter New England Health Internet:

- Front Page
- Health Profile
- Questionnaires
- Resources
- Health Services
- What's On

We were fortunate in being able to use some beautiful artwork by the Aboriginal artist, Loraine Riley Oldham, whose family is from the Thungutti Tribe near Kempsey, NSW. The artwork entitled *Traditional Bush Tucker* was used in its entirety, plus sections were taken out and developed into watermarks. The use of the artwork makes the site culturally appropriate and appealing, yet complies with style guidelines for government departments. To support and promote the site, promotional materials containing the artist's designs were also used on mouse pads, computer stickers and flyers. These promotional materials were distributed to Hunter New England employees and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.

#### Front Page

Consistent with cultural protocols, a disclaimer was placed in the first paragraph on this page, to explain that while great care had been taken to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people using the site were not offended by any of the content, we could not guarantee that hyperlinks to other sites would be as culturally sensitive.

Information, such as "About Us" and how to contact the project team were added as hyperlinks. This resulted in an uncluttered and easy to navigate front page.

Hyperlinks to the five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Info pages were repeated at the top of the page and on the main page, making it easier to move around the site.

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