

Aboriginal Healthworkers; Primary health care at the margins

By Bill Genat with Sharon Bushby, May McGuire, Eileen Taylor, Yvette Wally, Thelma Weston. Published by University of Western Australia, 2006. Paperback. 222 pages with index. ISBN 9871920694760. RRP \$39.95.

Reviewed by Juli Coffin, Assistant Professor, Aboriginal Health, Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health, WA

Aboriginal Healthworkers; Primary health care at the margins is a book that is relevant for the past, the present and, of course, the future. Things are not changing rapidly for the health care of Aboriginal people and nor is the burden of disease that exists for so many of our people in their day to day struggle for survival. The public health system and other 'systems' need to take note of the struggles that exist for Aboriginal people trying to provide culturally secure health care for their own people in a very culturally insecure framework. This book highlights the need for real engagement, inclusion and management by Aboriginal healthcare workers, people who see and carry this burden of poverty, sickness, funerals and hopelessness, for any real improvements to be made.

The misconceptions around the role of the Aboriginal Healthworker create ambiguity and tension, as professional boundaries are crossed over to provide care, no matter what the sacrifice. It is almost impossible for a non-Aboriginal person to understand the connectedness that exists in an Aboriginal community. Being Aboriginal is more about what we feel than what is said or done; it is not something that comes and goes. First and foremost we are Aboriginal. The job is always going to play second fiddle to family and cultural obligation. How else could an Aboriginal Healthworker function? How does someone actually choose to be or stay in the Healthworker role?

Genat and the co-authors of this book answer this question by describing these special people who have almost 'a calling' into the profession. They show how such special people are integral to the attainment of better health for Aboriginal Australians, yet to be able to provide this brokerage there is a great personal and often cultural cost. The job of an Aboriginal Healthworker has many stressors and issues around its role and status in the health service itself and in the community (from family and peers). This role is then often expected to be effective without the appropriate supports or management in place.

This book is useful for all who may employ, work with or wish to become involved in Aboriginal health and Aboriginal

Healthworkers. Contextually the book is very urban but has application in rural and remote settings; the issues are no different although in some settings more pronounced. This book outlines some of the issues associated with the specialist versus the 'jack of all trades' approaches to defining healthworker roles. Standard forms of communication and job descriptions do not always work.

The diverse range of topics covered throughout the five chapters take the reader on a journey through perspectives and emotion that come from the intrinsic knowledge that is involved with Aboriginal health work. The story within this book starts with a chapter titled 'At the frontline,' which describes the origins of the Aboriginal Healthworker practice and goes into the next phase with the demands and personal sacrifice that comes with working in such a role. The authors examine why there is such a dispirited response to Aboriginal health care and how the multiple demands on Aboriginal Healthworkers cannot be understood by people who do not have such a close connection to the families for which they are caring.

The third chapter is around the perspectives of health professionals, titled 'Working alongside healthworkers', and their views on the role and the experiences and learnings they are gaining; a most powerful story for those who have not been exposed to such diversity in the workplace. The other content deals with the "tenuous professional identity" that Aboriginal Healthworkers try to hang onto as the work they do is recognised as more than tokenistic and holds value among all other health disciplines.

The final chapter highlights the key experiences from an Aboriginal Healthworker perspective and compares and contrasts the similar work done around parts of the country, the variations and the unique struggle and masking that takes place. The book offers cultural, emotional and intrinsic insight into a world rarely experienced and more often suppressed by bigger systemic issues and the burden of disease. Indeed, the role of the Aboriginal Healthworker as the authors describe is the "genesis of a healing practice".

The language in this book is easy to read and would assist any health professional entering into the public health arena. Having a shared understanding about the world of an Aboriginal Healthworker would make such a transition far easier for everyone. There is much accuracy and honesty in this book as quotes are utilised to help the reader interpret the story from 'both sides' and judge where the two indeed do overlap and when and where they are at opposite ends. There are only a couple of summary tables as the book is written in a very qualitative and narrative way. It is easy to see the conflicting priorities and ambiguity surrounding the healthcare of Aboriginal people from the responses by those

who provide these grassroots services right up to those who enforce policy and manage the Aboriginal healthcare workers. The book overall is an easy and informative read, with the last chapter highlighting some interesting pieces of work written around the provision of healthcare for Aboriginal people and culminating with the desire to shift forward; the very essence of what Aboriginal people caring for Aboriginal people was meant to create.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in the failings of a health care system for those most at need and at the margins, and their carers who are also at the margins – Aboriginal Healthworkers.

Nutrition Promotion: Theories and methods, systems and settings

By Tony Worsley. Published by Allen & Unwin, NSW, 2008. Paperback, 429 pages plus index. ISBN 9781741752410. RRP \$69.95

Reviewed by Christina Pollard, Nutrition Policy Advisor, Food Unit, Environmental Health Directorate, Department of Health in Western Australia

“Nutrition promotion isn’t simply educating people about nutrients. It is partly about nutrition, but far more ...”

Developing strategies to improve nutrition is complex, if you are interested in why, and indeed how, then you should read this book. As well as providing readers with a summary of important nutrition issues, it addresses the complexities that lie behind them. This book is about public health and nutrition promotion – an essential and important perspective that should be considered by all public health and health promotion practitioners. The book is not about nutrients or specific foods and does not attempt to give specifics about dietary intakes.

The author has applied theory to the study of nutrition and its promotion for many years and shares his insights in this book. Reading the book is like sitting with Professor Worsley as he shares his deep understanding of nutrition through insights into theoretical perspectives and provides practical applications to demonstrate concepts. After reading about the historical or theoretical perspective on a topic, explanations are often followed with “a good example of this is ...” The writing style is chatty and dense (with terminology, theories, examples and explanations). Sometimes this means that sections require re-reading as you contemplate what was said. Australian

and international perspectives are provided and all of the important topical issues are touched on.

The historical perspective is described in each topic area, leading to a deeper understanding of how we got to the where we are now, what the issues are and how we might begin to address them. Each chapter and topic discussed has relevant theoretical and practical peer-reviewed references as well as contemporary websites to enable the reader to explore further. The tables and figures in text provide a ‘to the point’ summary of what is being discussed with appropriate references. The discussion questions at the end of each chapter challenge the reader to take their understanding to the next level.

Nutrition Promotion is an essential read for nutrition and health promotion students or anyone interested in nutrition promotion.

Often as health promotion practitioners we are busy ‘doing’ with little time to sit back and process why things are the way they are. We come face-to-face with the barriers to improving nutrition every day. This book helps us take a step back and consider the bigger issues that influence what we do. Most importantly, I enjoyed reading this book and learnt a lot along the way.