

13th Annual NT Chronic Diseases Network Conference
Prevention is the Best Medicine
September 10th and 11th, Darwin 2009

Topic:

Indigenous men and chronic disease: can sport become more than a game and a preventative tool?

Introduction

It has been said of sport that it has often provided a paradox within Australia society. It has both connected and disconnected people. It has brought people together while also separating them. In 1895 at the Pine Creek New Year's Sports a local Aboriginal runner, Bismark, entered and won the Maiden Plate and the Pine Creek Handicap beating the European favourite. He also was awarded 10 pounds. The response to his success was that the program for the race the following year noted: 'No aboriginals, or other coloured races, to be allowed to compete in European events' (Stephen, p.63).

In addressing the link between Indigenous men, sport and chronic disease, I wish to acknowledge a number of other and related disconnections. We are familiar with one that is race based and that has infected the inclusiveness of sport in this country. There is a further one that separates discourses around sport from those of health. Sport can be seen as a game, a leisure activity, a time to relax and enjoy. It can become separated from more serious issues affecting health, culture and gender. We can make strenuous efforts to separate our health from the important, but sometimes disguised, connections it offers with the wellbeing of our physical, social and gendered bodies.

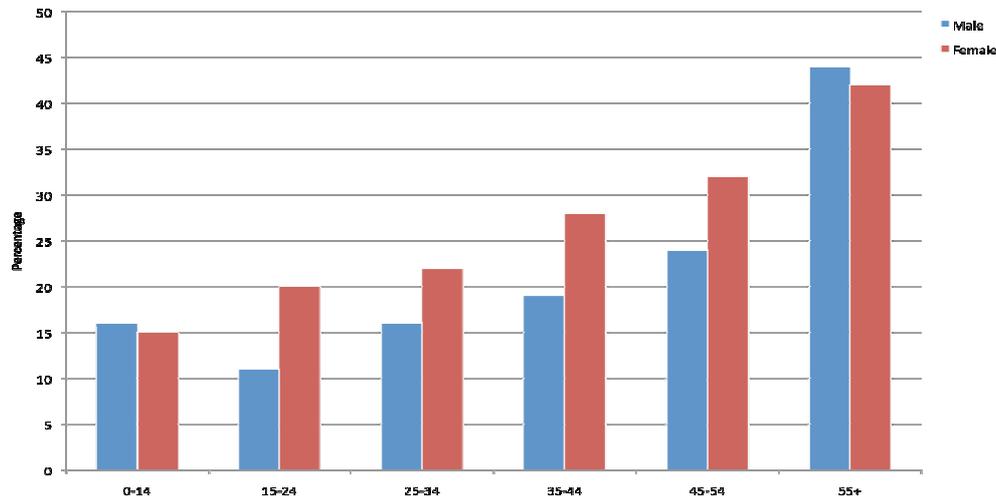
Let me offer some brief introductory points: **Firstly**, sport (and, for the purposes of this presentation, Australian Rules football), engages many Indigenous men in this country. The relative over-representation of Indigenous men in the AFL in 2009, for example, 11% of all registered players, did not come easily or quickly.



This painting by a desert man captures some of the various interests in his life. It is worth noting within the specific interest of this conference, how alcohol and tobacco sit quite comfortably with football, church, education, hunting and men's ceremonies. His painting is a reminder that young men are known to give up or put aside many other competing interests in order to play football whether it be winter or summer, petrol sniffing or girl friends, as long as the day provides light. Football provides one of the most engaging social experiences for many young Indigenous men.

Secondly, sport belongs to a changing cultural landscape and there are many examples where people continue to adapt the game to suit their local context. This first image is from 1983 when part of an Under 17 Touring Side in Townsville (of which I will say more later); the group was learning the Torres Strait Islander action song, Ki Ke Riba, from Eddie Mabo before it went on Tour. The second images describe the ways in which some desert communities open up their football carnivals expressing respect for the families of those who have passed away. The third image comes from the Garnduwa Colts Championships held in Fitzroy Crossing earlier this year. A smoking ceremony is timetabled into the carnival for all who are present. Not only does sport engage important cultural values but also it can become an important vehicle where they are named and strengthened.

Thirdly, as shown by this next slide, there is evidence from many parts of Australia that young Indigenous men begin to disengage from clinic and health care as they enter adolescence.



Use of GP and Specialist Services

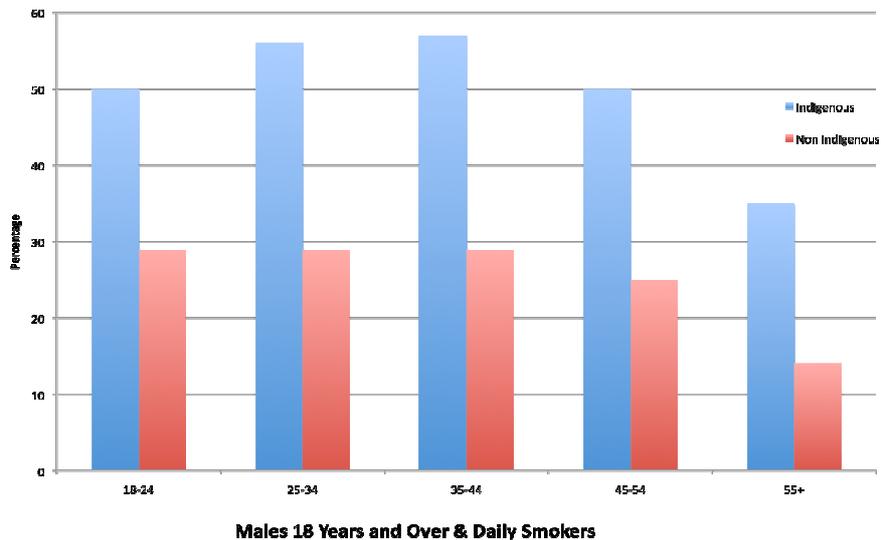
Figures are of percentage of age cohort who consulted GP/specialist in the two week prior to the survey. (NATSIHS 2004/05 data stratified by gender as reported in: Lingwoodock G. A literature review: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males and Type 2 diabetes. Masters of Public Health minor thesis, University Deakin University Institute of Koorie Education, 2007.)

Their patterns of disengagement differ quite noticeably from patterns of engagement by women who gradually increase their involvement as they get older. It is only after the age of 55 do men show an increase in engagement over women and it is not difficult to imagine why.

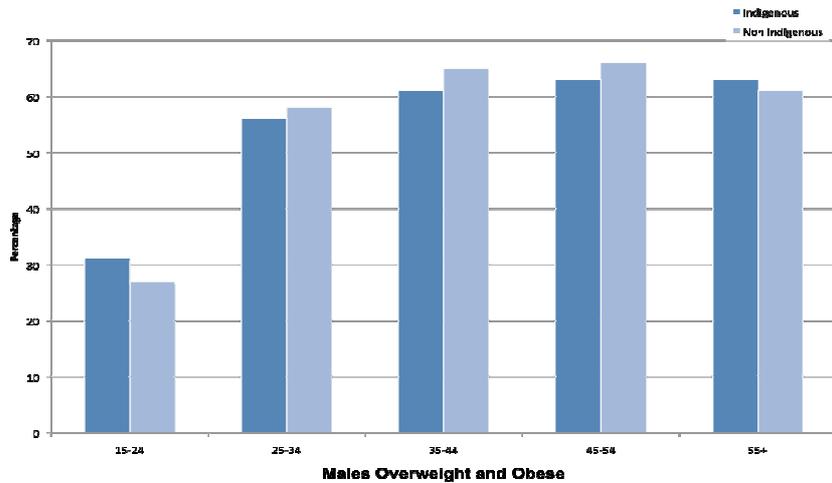
Fourthly, the status of Indigenous men's health remains critical. I have just returned from being with men in the south-east Kimberley desert region. In that region, and over the past ten years, nearly two-thirds of all deaths have been men. When one puts aside ten percent due to accidents (mainly vehicle), another ten percent due to self-harm (suicide), there remain nearly another thirty percent who have died before the age of fifty and largely from preventable disease. The median age of death for men in this region was around 43 years.

Finally, and for the particular purposes of this conference and its theme, I wish to focus on three key health factors that link young Indigenous men, their health and the possibility of engagement by sport: **tobacco**, **obesity** and **alcohol**. When these three high risk factors co-exist and interact, their combined effect explains for 37% of the total burden of disease and injury in the Indigenous community (ABS & AIH, 2008, p. 148). Let me mention them briefly.

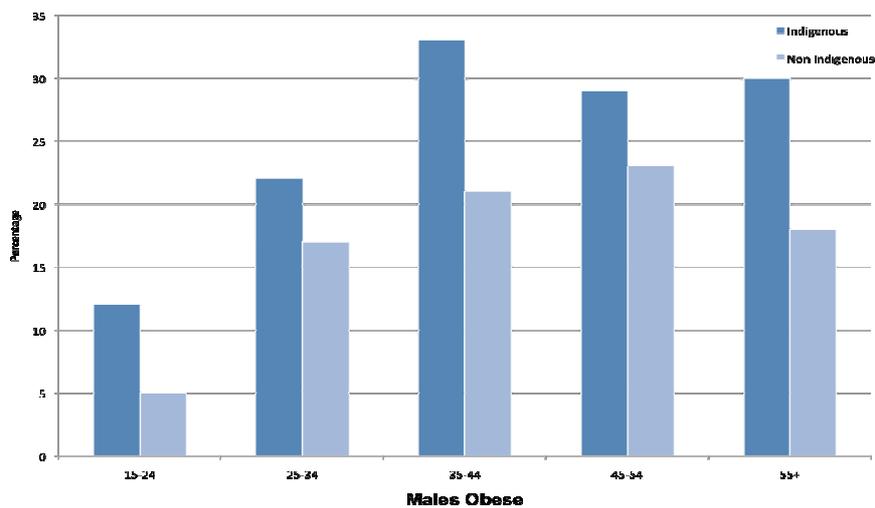
The leading cause of burden and injury for Indigenous men's health is the smoking of tobacco (ABS & AIH p. 138). As this graph shows, the gap between Indigenous and non Indigenous men rates of smoking becomes initiated by the high rate of uptake of smoking by young Indigenous men.



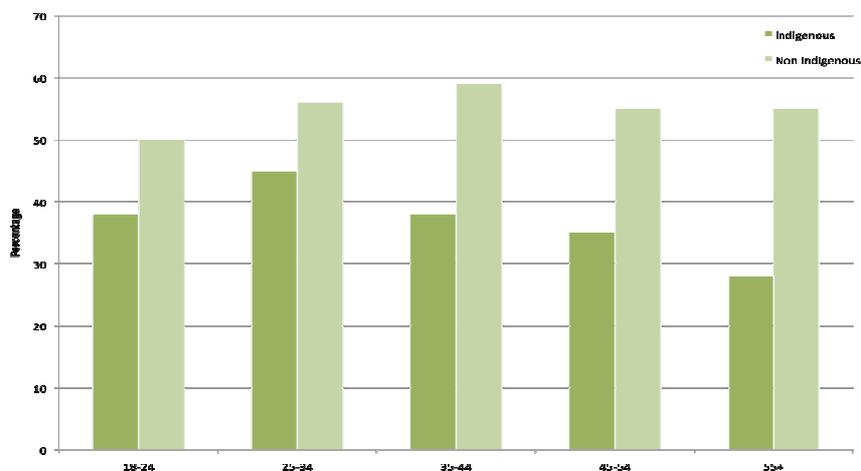
Secondly, obesity. When gathered into overweight and obese categories both Indigenous and non Indigenous men show a similar pattern of increasing BMI after the age of 24, peaking in the 45-54 age group.



However, if one simply focuses on the obese group the difference becomes much more marked, particularly in the 15-24 year age group.

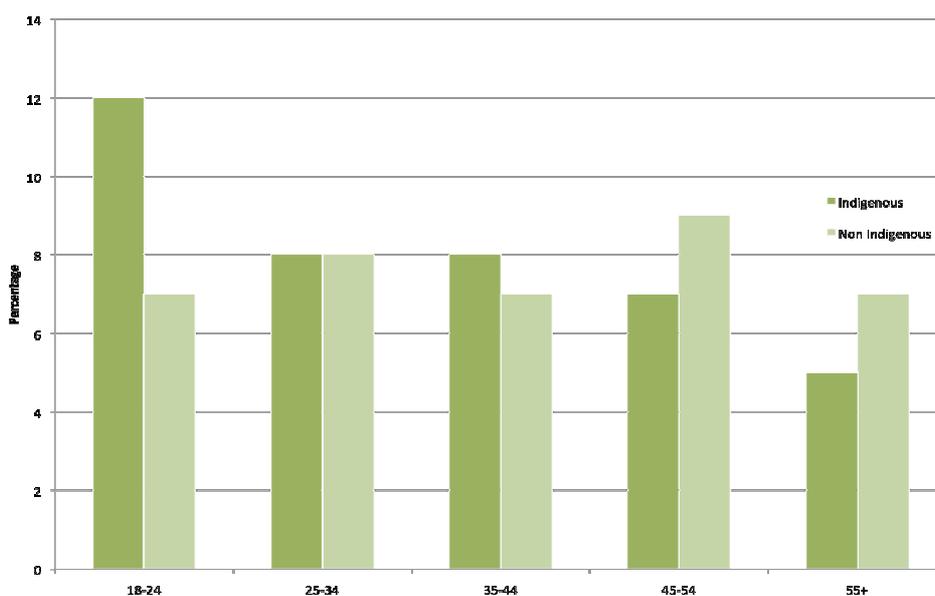


Finally, alcohol. In term of low risk use of alcohol Indigenous men consume much less than non Indigenous men across all age groups.



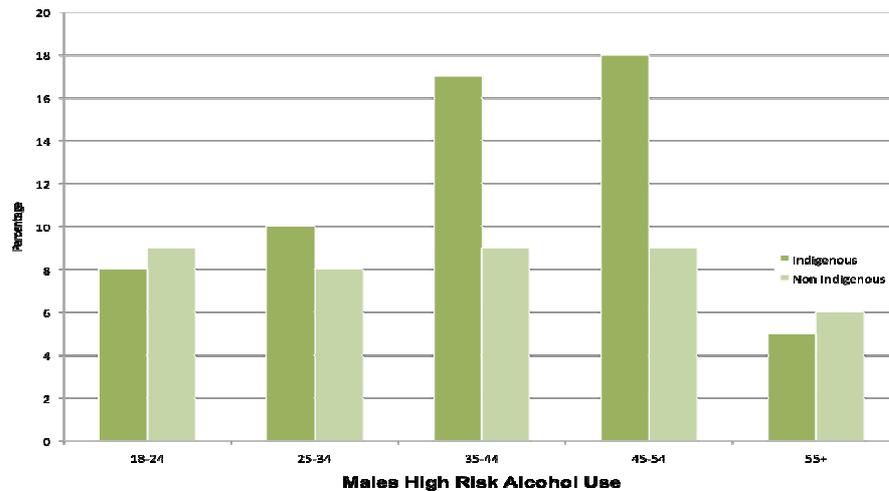
Males Low Risk Alcohol Use

However, when the risk moves to the next and higher category of risk young Indigenous men are much more clearly identified. Signs of risky alcohol use are revealed in later teenage years.



Males Risky Alcohol Use

When we move to attention on high risk alcohol use it is in the later years that Indigenous men are more significantly represented.



Hence, we might conclude: **In relation to smoking, obesity and alcohol use there are clear and concerning signs for Indigenous men who take up these high risk and inter-related health activities at a relatively young age.**

Two Stories

Let me now turn to an understanding of the culture of sport for Indigenous men and how a better understanding of this culture can offer ideas in preventing some of the complex and critical health issues affecting young Indigenous men.

In 1983 I participated in an Under 17 Touring Side of Australian Rules Footballers in Townsville who sought to travel to Melbourne, play games against young men their own age and see the Grand Final. The majority of the team were Indigenous. In 2008, twenty-five years later, we returned to look at their health. All men were still alive and none, we might add, had ever spent time in prison. However, signs of chronic disease had now become evident (McCoy et al, 2008, 2009).

In 2009, and only a few months ago, I accompanied a group of Under 21 Footballers from the Kutjungka desert region to Fitzroy Crossing for the Kimberley Colt Championships. There they competed against young men their own age from across the Kimberley region.

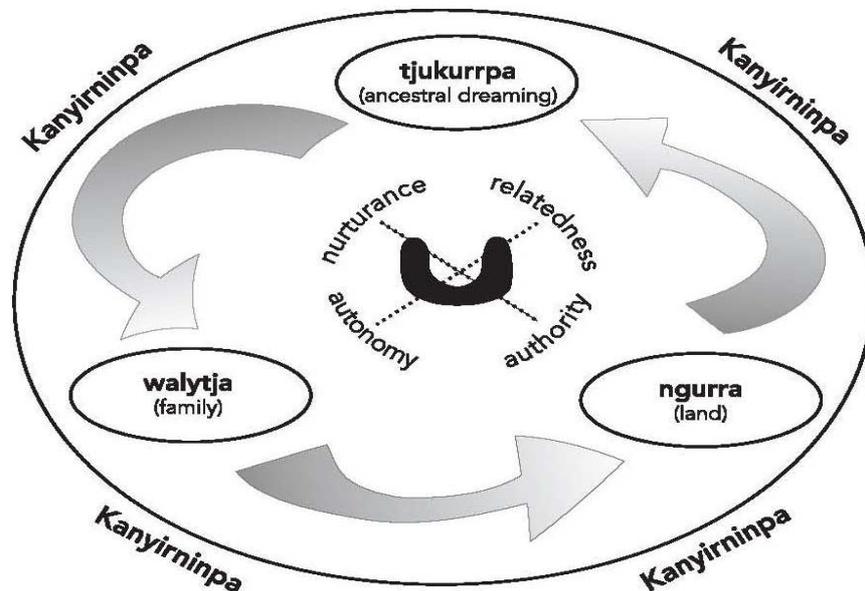
Despite the first group coming from tropical North Queensland and the second group from the desert region of the Kimberley, and despite a difference of twenty-six years, in significant ways both groups shared something similar.

Let me highlight some similarities:

- a) There is significant **energy** when young men play football. In the Townsville group those who went on Tour had to give up many of their weekends over several months in order to raise enough money to go. When travelling with the Desert men some months ago clear parallels were made by the men about its similarity when travelling together for annual men's ceremonies: vehicles moving as one, young and older men being together. This was football, not ceremony, but it captured some of the gendered energy of that other cultural journey. Football allows young men to move within an important gendered and generational cultural space.
- b) Linked with the energy there is also significant **attention** by young men at this time. Within the framework of coaching and leadership young men can be particularly responsive to what they are told by older men. Both the Townsville and Desert group of men were entering into the field of competition and, for the Townsville group, it was on a field they had never ever seen or engaged before. Young men at this time are particularly vulnerable as they seek to compete, display skill and perform well. They are open to those leading to guide, protect, advise and inspire them. Older men are expected to take leadership, speak strongly, motivate and set clear boundaries of group and individual behaviour.
- c) The journey, the games, the highlights and lowlights, the funny and ridiculous moments are **remembered** and retold in later years. These can be important moments in a young man's life, particularly on his pathway to adulthood and as he prepares and seeks to join the older men on their adult field of play.

Energy, attention and memory form a large part of this sporting and shared experience. They offer opportunities for young men's lives to be significantly re-shaped and re-directed by those who are leading, coaching and guiding them.

These elements can quite easily and seamlessly be gathered under the umbrella of the desert value and relationship of *kanyirninpa* (or *holding*) (McCoy 2008). These young men can be understood as being *held* by older men and in ways that reinforce ancient relationships and male pathways to adulthood. *Kanyirninpa* expresses key relationships within desert people, particularly where the authority of older people is linked with the nurturance of those who are younger. Those who live and express authority are ones who demonstrate care. They also help young men resolve one of the growing and significant tensions of their lives: relatedness versus autonomy.



(McCoy 2008, p.21)

What appears as a simple cultural relationship (first visible when a mother *holds* her baby) originates in men's ceremony where spiritual forces are engaged and where boys are *held* by older men on the journey to adulthood. While nothing further will be said here about these ceremonies, it simply needs be emphasised that these rituals reflect extensive and important values and inter-generational relationships for men. All of social life is held within this dynamic and gendered world as older men express their authority by the ways they nurture and 'grow up' younger men. In contemporary contexts we might call such 'older' people elders, teachers, mentors and parents. In sport they are called coaches, trainers, club officials and managers.

What can occur for many young Indigenous men in contemporary society is that their sometimes fragile transition into adulthood is supported through the realm of sport. Those who lead and coach are actually assisting a young person into that cultural and gendered space of adulthood. When done well these older men *hold*, protect, teach and nurture. The young male experiences being safely cared for in the company of peers and friends. He listens, pays attention, modifies his behaviour and disciplines his life. He enters male company that provides a boundary of authority with the experience of care and where individual behaviour becomes willingly negotiated, modified and changed.

When we went back and interviewed those involved in the Townsville 1983 experience we found that not all young men twenty-five years ago felt safe within their own homes and families; however, they did experience being *held* and safe within the wider relationships of the football club. It is not just that clubs can provide a social space where young men can develop their own dreams, learn trust in one another and experience being supported by older men and also women. They can grow up in a *holding* space that shapes and develops their lives; it has the potential to seriously affect and modify their attitudes, behaviour and health.

After the final siren

When addressing the key health issues influenced by tobacco, obesity and alcohol we might think that simply paying more attention on the young and those who are playing sport is all that is needed. While more attention is needed, what this can fail to appreciate is that the relationship of *kanyirninpa* (or *holding*) is a reciprocal relationship. The sporting and social space that is constructed supports and links older with younger generations of men. This generational relationship is critical to the health of both groups. And, it is in this context, that what happens after the final siren has sounded for those who cease playing competitive sport becomes relevant. Their transition into *holding* those who are younger than themselves provides new challenges and opportunities. It also provides a context where their health and wellbeing remains open to be reinforced and strengthened.

Hence, some suggestions to conclude.

Firstly, in seeking to address and improve the health and lifestyle of young Indigenous men we need greater awareness of cultural contexts of sport. In particular, and often forgotten, we need to develop and increase the capacity of those who *hold* younger men. It is not enough to focus solely on the young. We need to invest in older men and their abilities to lead, motivate, challenge and *hold* those younger than themselves. These men *hold* great influence over the young and their behaviour, and also vice versa.

Secondly, we need to better understand the nature of sporting clubs, organisations and carnivals. Their capacity, through the roles of men and women, are important in providing a safe and generational experience for the young. Clubs have the ability to set guidelines for the use of tobacco and alcohol amongst older and younger players. They also have the ability to address obesity by involving young men after they have retired from competitive sport. These clubs, trips and annual sporting events also provide a window of opportunity in offering older men the responsibilities and privileges of *holding* those who are younger. It is this cultural relationship that can help address the challenge of obesity, a particular challenge for some men after the final siren of their playing has sounded.

Thirdly, and finally, we need to continue to address the various disconnections mentioned at the beginning of this paper. These are not just those disconnections based on race but those discourses that separate the playing of sport from issues of health, culture and gender. We live in physical, social and gendered bodies and the arena of sport offers a particular space where the health needs of young Indigenous men can be more positively addressed. The current and critical status of Indigenous men's health demands nothing less. We might also discover a preventative tool that is far more readily and easily available than we have previously imagined. We might even discover this to be a new, challenging and, please excuse the pun, an enjoyable exercise.

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