



NEWS matters

NSW Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Health Strategy

Four Aboriginal Students gain a place on NSW Inaugural Bachelor of Midwifery at UTS

This year a positive step has been made to support initiatives aimed at addressing shortfalls in the midwifery workforce. The University of Technology Sydney will commence an undergraduate course for midwives, a first for NSW. The NSW Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Health Strategy Training and Support Unit at Northern Sydney and Central Coast Area Health Service (TSU) has worked in partnership with UTS and prospective Aboriginal students to facilitate their smooth transition to the course. It is hoped that by providing this support, NSW will shortly have many Aboriginal midwives to provide culturally appropriate services and to guide maternity service providers to ensure equity and continued increased access for Aboriginal women in mainstream services. It has taken three years work with many wonderful people to get to this point and the future is looking very bright.

Background

In 2000, NSW Health funded the now well-known NSW Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Health Strategy (AMIHS) (NSW Aboriginal Perinatal Health Report 2003). The TSU has many performance indicators to meet as part of its agreement with NSW Health. Possibly one of the most critical is to increase the numbers of Aboriginal

midwives. There are many barriers for Aboriginal students entering the tertiary education system. These include family commitments and community expectations, but perhaps the most difficult to address are literacy problems and lack of confidence in their ability to perform at university level. It is a sad fact that many indigenous people do not complete their education for various community and social reasons. This can lead to a lack of self-esteem and doubt about their ability to embark on a university course.

The initial steps taken to achieve this goal, was the development of a maternal and infant health course that could be articulated to midwifery. A previous article had dealt with the planning and implementation of the Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Health Preparatory Course at Yooroang Garang School of Indigenous Studies at Sydney University (MM 2003; Vol 21 No 1). This course will enter its 3rd year in 2005 and has so far had 18 Aboriginal students complete the course. Of these, 11 are now enrolled in further education at universities across the state. 5 others are considering further education including the Bachelor of Midwifery in 2006. Each student is encouraged to view the maternal and infant health course as the beginning of a journey of education not as a one-off

course. Although the TSU is firmly committed to increasing indigenous midwifery numbers, it sees its role of supporting any Aboriginal student to continue education, particularly in a health-related field. The unit offers a range of support, which includes facilitating the development of a Curriculum Vitae and professional portfolio to attending campus sessions at a student's request. Another key responsibility is to liaise with pre-existing indigenous support institutions to facilitate good communication and optimal support for the student.

In January 2004, 3 indigenous students, who completed the maternal and infant health course the previous year, commenced a post graduate unit of the Graduate Diploma of Midwifery. These students were keen to commence the Bachelor of Midwifery which was hoped would start in that year. When it became apparent that this would not be possible, the TSU negotiated with the Midwifery Faculty that these students be given the opportunity to study a unit. The reason for this was two-fold. The students would be given a taste of university life during the quieter summer semester plus it would keep their motivation and commitment to study alive. This experience taught the TSU and UTS Faculty many valuable les-

sons and demonstrated that their theoretical knowledge was very strong due to their years of practical experience compared to the Registered Nurses. There is no substitute for hands-on skill acquisition. It enabled the students to see how they would cope with university life and 2 of the 3 have been offered a place on the Bachelor of Midwifery.

Another student who completed the Yooroang Garang maternal and infant health course in November 2004, along with another indigenous woman working in a metropolitan health service have also been accepted into the Bachelor of Midwifery. This makes a total of 4 prospective indigenous midwives with more working towards entry in the next few years.

The Future

Apart from continuing to support more indigenous students to embark on a health-related degree, the TSU is aiming to focus on schools. It is important to target young school children so that they may be informed about careers in health and the subjects required to undertake these studies. The Department of Education Aboriginal Learning Works, Yooroang Garang and the TSU formed a partnership to develop marketing tools for use by midwives, Aboriginal Health Workers and the key stakeholders in various forums to inform students of these pathways to education, training and employment. Several prospective students have been reached by presentation and distribution of

the marketing tools at Women's Reference Groups and community consultations which all of the AMIHS programs are required to hold as part of their performance agreements.

Yooroang Garang and UTS have been very supportive in regards to realising the dreams of NSW Health and the TSU. In particular, Sally Farrington at Yooroang Garang and Joanne Gray at UTS have worked hard to ensure all the needs of these students and the TSU are met. UTS have had a proactive approach to the inclusion of indigenous students and the provision of cultural and rural guidance in the development of the course. The vision for the future is that these trail blazing indigenous students will also eventually develop cultural modules for many education providers and for all midwifery students in NSW. Their knowledge and experience is invaluable to those midwives who wish to provide safe, quality care to Aboriginal women and their families during their maternity care. In New Zealand, Maori midwives provide cultural modules for universities and maternity care providers.

As we enter this exciting phase of midwifery education in NSW, each midwife who encounters any of these Bachelor of Midwifery students, regardless of race, needs to reflect on the journey the individual may have taken to realise their midwifery dream and make them feel welcome and fully supported. All of these students are precious and may indeed hold part of the future of midwifery as a profession.

Sue Hendy - Special Midwifery Project officer
NSW Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Health Strategy



ATTENTION Nurses, Midwives, Early Childhood Nurses

We are interested in talking to Nurses, Midwives and Early Childhood Nurses who are:

- ▲ currently working, or have worked with women and infants, and
- ▲ who live and / or work in Western Sydney.

If you meet the above criteria, we would like to invite you to take part in a research study investigating the way people care for babies.

For further details or to register your interest to participate please telephone Leigh Wilson on: 9894 8476

This study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Sydney. (No: 11-2004/3/7873)