



CULTURAL BIRTHING KITS: THE MUNGABAREENA ABORIGINAL CORPORATION AND ALBURY WODONGA HEALTH BIRTHING SUITE PROJECT

by SHREE HELAND, Koori Maternity Support Worker,
Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation, Wodonga

Introduction

I am a proud Yorta Yorta/ Wiradjuri Woman and the mother of three children, aged 21, 16 and 6. I grew up in Mooropna a rural town on the banks of the Goulburn River, 181 km north of Melbourne in the Shepparton area of Victoria. After 33 years of living there I moved to Wodonga in 2011 and I'm currently living just over the border in NSW.

I started my career in Health back in 2002 when I achieved a Certificate IV in Nursing. I currently also hold a Certificate IV in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care Practice.

I am the Koori Maternity Support Worker in the Koori Maternity Service (KMS), which has been operating for over 20 years. On the border the KMS program involves the Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation and Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service. I work in partnership with midwife Kate Preston. Together, we support Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal women having Aboriginal babies and their families during pregnancy and until their babies are 6-weeks old. About four percent of women accessing maternity services at Albury Wodonga Health identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or identify their babies as such. Our aim is to provide these women and their families with holistic, and culturally appropriate care, while increasing access to, and participation in, antenatal services and postnatal support.

I first worked at the Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation in this role from 2012 – 2016. I returned there in January 2019 and during discussion, some of the women accessing the KMS project identified that they would like to see some Indigenous resources in the Birthing Suite at the Albury Wodonga maternity unit. Initially, I was planning to purchase two paintings. I met with local Aboriginal artist and Barkindji/Maraura/Yorta Yorta woman, Tamara Murray, who has a business called *MaraMay Arts*. <https://www.maramayart.com.au>

Tamara and I sat down together to discuss the design of the paintings. We also talked about the Indigenous cultural kits designed and sold for education purposes by her family's business: *Murra Murra Arts & Crafts*.

We began to explore how the designs for the paintings might be incorporated in a range of resources for the KMS project that would be in line with promoting the concept of 'Birthing on Country'.



"Culture is our way of healing, telling stories, and keeping spirits and traditions alive. It's our connection to the land." - Tamara Murray

Birthing on Country

'Birthing on Country' is an international movement aimed at promoting community control of birthing for First Nations people. The term has been described as

... a metaphor for the best start in life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies and their families because it describes an integrated, holistic, and culturally appropriate model of care.¹²

Birthing is the most powerful thing that happens to a mother and child. Traditionally, Aboriginal women gave birth on Country with other women around them and important ceremonies took place that welcomed the child into the world. 'Birthing on Country' connects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to their Country (and to the land) enabling the maintenance of long-standing cultural practices and family connections, whether they live in rural or urban situations.

The 'Birthing Suite Project' is born

The idea of developing Indigenous cultural birthing kits that could be taken into the local maternity unit grew out of the early discussions I had with Tamara about her artwork and the 'Birthing on Country' movement. I set up a meeting with Siobhan Mckenna, (Midwife Manager of the Birth Suite at Albury Wodonga Health) and Kate Preston, my midwife partner at Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation. This was the start of the 'Birthing Suite Project', a collaboration between Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation and staff at Albury Wodonga Health.

A plan was made for Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation to explore funding in order to develop and provide the Birthing Suite and Special Care Nursery with a locally designed Indigenous Cultural Birthing Kit. The case was made for community engagement in developing a culturally sensitive approach to changing the environment in these areas, with several aims:

- Encourage a positive relationship with local families
- Promote a safe and culturally sensitive space for birth
- Increase the likelihood of women accessing the hospital to give birth
- Improve health outcomes for Indigenous mothers and babies

Funding was sourced from Albury City Council Community and Cultural Grants and Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation.



The Birthing Suite Project: an ongoing partnership

Julie Wright (Director of Midwifery & Nursing - Women's & Children's Services, Albury Wodonga Health) says that the Birthing Suite Project continues to promote the partnership between Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation and Albury Wodonga Health.

"I'm looking forward to this not just being the start - it's taken a long time to get to this point - but an ongoing relationship so we can continue to improve our offering to local Aboriginal women"

The Indigenous cultural birthing kit

The Indigenous cultural birthing kit was designed in consultation with women who access the KMS. It is portable so it can easily be carried in a box and erected and dismantled in the birthing rooms by the midwives.

The cultural birthing kit includes:

- Two pieces of Artwork
- Pillow cases, baby wraps and blankets for hospital beds
- A drop-down wall covering of a birthing tree
- Native scented essential oils
- Candle holders
- A coolamon and grass tiles
- Possum skins

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Art Work

Art work and inspiration provided by Indigenous artist Tamara Murray <https://www.maramayart.com.au>

'Representing all the Mums finding their strength and courage when facing the fears they never knew existed. The moment a baby is born, a mother is also born.'



'Becoming a mum and sharing our strengths to uplift each other. Becoming a mum is so rewarding, yet a huge eye opener. This painting symbolises the importance of branching out and finding your support network for this new chapter. It's OK to ask for help and be vulnerable; we all struggle and you're not alone in this new chapter of your life.'

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A drop-down wall covering of a birthing tree
(printed from a blown up photo, taken by Shree on her mobile phone) and grass tiles

Coolamon

Provided by Local artist Phillip Murray, proud Yorta Yorta/ Dhudhuroa man, Murra Murra Arts and Crafts. <https://www.facebook.com/murramurraarts/>



Pillowcases, Blankets and Candle Holders

The artwork designed by Tamara Murray was used to print pillowcases, blankets and Candle Holders.



Native Scented Essential Oils

Essentially Australia, <https://essentiallyaustralia.com.au>

Ochre

Ochre* was donated to the KMS Program by Fleur Magick Dennis a Wiradjuri Woman. In 2019, I organised a Birthing and Rebirthing Camp on behalf of the Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation and Fleur was a presenter.

*Ochre painting has always been used by First Nations people in Australia for storytelling on rock walls as well as decoration on possessions. It is especially prized for body painting for big ceremonies, initiation ceremonies or dances to do with rain.



Possum Skins

Lenah Game Meats Tasmania <https://www.lenah.com.au/wallaby-game-meat>

References

1. Kildea, S., Hickey, S., Barclay, L., Kruske, S., Nelson, C., Sherwood, J., Roe, Y.L. (2019). Implementing Birthing on Country services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families: RISE Framework. *Women and Birth*, 32, (5) 466-475.
2. Kildea S, Van Wagner V. 'Birthing on Country' maternity service delivery models: an Evidence Check rapid review brokered by the Sax Institute (<http://www.saxinstitute.org.au>) on behalf of the Maternity Services Inter- Jurisdictional Committee for the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council: Sydney, 2013.



UPBEAT PODCAST PROMOTING THE BEST OF RURAL HEALTH

by CLARE ROSS, Manager Media and Communications, National Rural Health Alliance

Have you ever imagined a different life? Fortunately for many people, there's an element of choice in the place they call home, whether that's in the city or country.

Around 7 million people are living and working in our regions and rural communities and we've seen some recent positive growth in our regions due to the focus on domestic life and travel during COVID-19.

City or country, it seems there is no one preferred way-of-life that seemingly 'has it all'. Whether you prefer seeing cows in paddocks, tumbleweed rolling across country, or enjoy people-watching on every café corner, your view of paradise is your own.

However, in this prosperous nation of ours, what we can and do expect is that our basic human needs are met. As health professionals in the baby business, you well know that healthcare is a foundation of our wellbeing, our family's health and the sustainability of society.

Therefore, despite many benefits of rural living, it is unacceptable that quality healthcare must be a trade-off. The further away you live from metropolitan cities the harder it gets to access affordable, sustainable health services.

From a policy perspective, talking about this rural/city divide in the quality of healthcare usually has a 'deficit' framing. This negativity is a necessary evil, because pointing out the gaps is the strongest way to highlight that the rural health system needs attention.

At the Alliance we are very aware of the reputational harm that can come from focusing on rural health problems.

There is so much great work being done in our regions, towns and communities across Australia to capitalise on technology, innovation and downright terrific people who care about health – and this is where the new podcast **Build 'Em Up** comes into its own.

Build 'Em Up is a monthly podcast series featuring upbeat stories with a link to rural health – showcasing the good news stories and experiences of living in rural communities. These are the stories that might get buried in the media or that don't get told at all.

The reason The Alliance is presenting Build 'Em Up is because our vision – 'healthy and sustainable rural, regional and remote communities' – is about country people and their health and wellbeing. So this podcast is about them, not the work of the Alliance and its member organisations.

We have a terrific supporter in nbn who shares the goal of creating a level playing field where people in rural and remote Australia can access face-to-face and digital health care services.

This is not sugar-coating or detracting from the challenges in rural health. We are still telling it how it is and advocating for policy to remove the inequities in health care, but we are also being mindful of giving voice to positive outcomes.

By amplifying success and innovation in rural health we are also highlighting the benefits and lifting the perception of living and working in rural Australia.

The Backstory

The name BUILD E'M UP comes from a country song by country singer and song-writer John Arnold from Toowoomba. He composed the song as a pick-me-up for rural, regional and remote communities during COVID-19 and involved people from right across the rural landscape who contributed words, phrases and poems to bring the song to life.

Have a listen to the full song here. The essence of Build 'em up is being a spark of hope, support and resilience for each other, which is exactly what a lot of great people are doing in the rural health space.