

# *Primary Health Networks* Submission to Productivity Commission: Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

## Darling Downs and West Moreton Primary Health Network Responses to Questions

Thank you for providing the opportunity to provide comment on this very thoughtful and comprehensive document. The document provides insight and useful strategies to consider for all evaluations, large and small. The questions, examples are thought provoking and rich. We have not attempted to answer every question, but to pick the issues that have had the most relevance and priority for us in the Darling Downs West Moreton PHN.

### **Overview**

The priority for all successful evaluations and the overwhelming key criteria to creating a useful program in any community regardless of cultural base is ensuring that the consumers of the proposed project or service were involved in the planning and development and have agreed on the outcomes of the program. The evaluation strategy and evaluators must either be directly involved (or a delegate) as near to the program development stage or commencement as early as possible. The information that you have included on page 28 – 31 *Planning early for Evaluation* is considered the most important principle of the evaluation strategy.

### *Questions on Objectives*

The evaluation of a program will need to examine, at a minimum, whether the program has met the intended outcome, met the intended deliverable of the program, did the program provide value or benefit against the cost of the program and importantly with in diverse population, barriers to implementation and unintended consequences of the program. Often the unintended consequences are most important in the consideration of a successful program. It is against the objectives that the program will be held accountable and reviewed. Hence the early stage program development and the clarity of the objectives is paramount to a successful evaluation strategy.

### *Question on Government Programs*

With the move to person centered/client centered funding within both aged care and disability funding there appears to be little regard for the cultural and indigenous issues of family and a boarder understanding of how an individual exists within a community. These matters will need to be considered or there may be an inauthentic understanding of the success of the programs and the expected changes they bring about. Again, the mitigation strategy is the inclusion and ownership of the community for the program and the agreement on the evaluation criteria.

### *Questions Evaluation approaches and methods.*

The Realist evaluation approach when the participants or community have been involved in the design and implementation of the program will be most successful. It will have the strongest sense of ownership and empowerment. The other approaches are important such as the developmental evaluation, participatory evaluation and economic evaluation are important and should be included

into a large whole of program review. The experimental design approach is generally not an appropriate approach in an indigenous community.

#### *Questions on Incorporating Indigenous Perspective into Evaluation*

The elements identified in the discussion paper on page 30 are all supported by the DDWM PHN. However, the barriers for large programs that cross many cultural regions are complex. It has been most difficult to find indigenous evaluators with no family, language engagement that may compromise their involvement.

However, all program development must begin with the end in mind and budgets for evaluation must be allocated at the commencement of the program design and proportionate to the program budget.

#### *Questions on the independence of Evaluation and Evaluators.*

Whether the evaluators are independent of government or within a independent branch of government, the evaluators must be engaged during the design process so they have full understanding, no conflict of interest, understanding of privacy etc. Importantly it must be agreed how changes to a program will be made based on evaluation. Will a program continue to its end point even if halfway through barriers and challenges are identified? Agreements must be reached on how the program integrity will be maintained and what are the ethical requirements of continuing a failing program. With indigenous program it is strongly recommended that the having and Indigenous oversight committee and the requirement to present the findings to indigenous stakeholders is more important than the evaluation being conducted externally.

#### *Questions on Ethical Evaluation*

Unfortunately, many Ethical requirements are barriers to agile program development and implementation, slowing down processes and requiring many hours of work that take the project beyond the boundaries of intent. Often ethical committees met irregularly and if you miss a meeting or it is cancelled it can delay a project for up to six months. This is not to say if there will be occasions that an ethical review should be conducted. However ethical review can add additional costs to programs through rewriting and adding additional requirements for no apparent change in the outcome.

Formal ethical reviews should only be conducted when it is identified that there is a negative consequence for a group or individuals from the program. This will need to be identified in risk management section of the project proposal.

#### *Question on Cultural Capability*

The guidelines provided on page 33 for Maori research provide a useful model that could be incorporated into commissioning processes and tender specifications for evaluators.

#### *Questions on Evaluations and Data*

The lack of quality localized data continues to present challenges to large and small evaluations. Some challenges would be mitigated with the development and agreed data dictionary, and a trial to ensure that all participants understand and have a common understanding of the data being collected and why.

Often during long program period, staff turnover has caused problems and needs to be included into the risk process. There is an assumption that a handover has occurred however it may not have

been comprehensive, and data will be flawed. New staff may not understand why the data is being collected and its importance.

*Questions on Improving Evaluative Culture Capability and Capacity.*

Strategies to improve the evaluative culture of an organization will require a top down effort with all managers having the expectation that programs will have an evaluation framework and that projects will not be approved without a program evaluation budget and strategy. Improving the capacity of program staff in evaluation skills should become a core competency of project staff. This does not mean that all staff will be experts, but all staff need to understand the values and basics of evaluation.

The culture within providers and project owners is also critical to the development of an evaluation culture. There must be an understanding that there will be an evaluation process for all program/projects external to their own and that the evaluation may be internal or external to government. Providers will be responsible for the collection of some program data and will need to be involved in the details of the evaluation process. Providers going through a tendering process will not be able to be involved until the procurement process is completed.

*Questions on Identifying and Translating Knowledge from Evaluation*

This is the critical point. How do we use the results of evaluations to inform future policy and program development? In the first instance we need to recognize that we are not going to achieve a homogenous result for programs across all indigenous communities. What works in one community is not going to work in another. It is unrealistic and disrespectful to suggest that such may occur for large programs across Australia.

Program evaluation will need to be place based and published/promoted to recognize the places and localized results.