

Closing the gap in mental health

Barwon Health is helping improve the quality of care for Aboriginal mental health clients through the introduction of an Aboriginal Cultural Consultant.

Aboriginal Cultural Consultant and social worker Janine Cattanach works within Mental Health, Drugs and Alcohol Services to educate and support staff about culturally appropriate care for Aboriginal clients, and to provide support to clients accessing those services.

"The role is three-fold," Janine explained, "it's about capacity building with our clinical staff around cultural awareness and providing culturally appropriate care to Aboriginal people, then there is direct contact with community when people enter our service through a brief follow up, and also policy development.

"We are re-educating staff and empowering them to feel confident and comfortable in asking clients about their background and being able to be responsive to their needs."

Janine explained that through education, workshops, and other promotional materials, more Aboriginal clients within the mental health and drugs and alcohol setting are being identified each year and provided with culturally appropriate care.

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"The increase in identification of Aboriginal clients is a combination of people asking the right questions and people feeling more comfortable about coming to the service," Janine said.

The Aboriginal community has higher prevalence rates of mental health disorders than non-Aboriginal people. However, Aboriginal people tend to seek less help than non-Aboriginal people and they also access services later rather than earlier on during illness.

Janine, whose traditional country is Woodycupaldiya in the Northern Territory, also explained the complexity of issues associated with treatment of Aboriginal clients.

"A fear of the hospital setting and racism, past and present, within the health setting can contribute to delays in requests for treatment. When people are treated badly it has such an effect that they won't return to the hospital and that is a fairly common thing," she said.

"At Barwon Health, what we're trying to do is eliminate mistrust by educating staff on the needs of Aboriginal clients and also educate them as to why it is so important to understand, acknowledge and identify Aboriginal culture."

Barwon Health's Mental Health, Drugs and Alcohol Service works with people in the community that are severely impacted by mental illness or substance disorders, and works closely with other agencies who also work with those clients. Mental Health, Drugs and Alcohol services includes an inpatient unit for people who are acutely unwell, a diverse range of community treatment teams, and a triage team that sits in the Emergency Department.



Aboriginal Cultural Consultant Janine Cattanach is helping to educate and support staff in identifying Aboriginal clients and their needs.

Poster Design By Janine Cattanach