



KEY MESSAGES

HEALS (Hearing Ear health Language and Speech services) project

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Policy context

The gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian's health outcomes is well documented but there are relatively few examples of how service delivery can be enhanced, particularly in urban settings, where most Aboriginal people live. Aboriginal families experience greater barriers when accessing health services for a number of reasons, including socio-economic barriers.

Data generated through the CRE and the Study of Environment on Aboriginal Resilience and Child Health (SEARCH) indicated that urban Aboriginal children endure a disproportionately high burden of middle-ear disease, with consequent hearing loss, speech and language impairment, and other complications. In NSW, waiting times for Ear, Nose, and Throat (ENT) surgery and speech-language pathology services routinely exceed six months and frequently exceed one year. To address this need, the Hearing, Ear health and Languages Services (HEALS) project was established as a collaboration among multiple healthcare agencies that was built on research partnerships founded through SEARCH to provide ENT and speech/language pathology services for Aboriginal children. HEALS is managed by one of the CRE partners, the Sydney Children Hospital Network (SCHN).

Key messages

- > During 2013-14, the NSW Ministry of Health provided \$1.7M to deliver specialist ear health and speech and language services to Aboriginal children, attending five Aboriginal Community Controlled Services linked to SEARCH, and one urban Aboriginal clinic in NSW. The HEALS program has successfully provided more than 5822 sessions of speech pathology and 194 ENT operations to Aboriginal children.
- > HEALS provides an example of how strong, pre-existing relationships that are built on mutual respect, trust, and common goals between researchers and the Aboriginal community can be leveraged to enable the strategic delivery of health services for Aboriginal people.
- > HEALS demonstrates that, with proper funding, efficient management, and a dedicated and collaborative team, health services needed to help Close the Gap can be made more accessible to Aboriginal families.
- > The strength of HEALS lay in the ability to provide services that addressed a wide range of barriers that Aboriginal families are known to face. This included providing no-cost services in culturally appropriate settings and offering personalised support to Aboriginal families.
- > The success of this framework offers an incentive for policy makers to provide recurrent funding to facilitate longer term planning and sustainability.

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