
Shane Merritt – for discussion October 2009

Review of:

Discussion Paper - *Reclaiming the Spirit of Well Being: Promising healing practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people* by Dr Melisah Feeney, Centre for Applied Psychology, Canberra University February 2009

© Melisah Feeney 2009.
This work is copyright. You may download, display, print, reproduce this material in unaltered form only (retaining this notice) for your personal, non-commercial use, or use within your organisation. All rights are reserved. Requests and inquiries should be directed to Melisah Feeney at GPO Box 1792, Canberra ACT 260 or melisah.feeney@gmail.com 1 of 25

Pros and Cons of this paper as it relates to ACATLGN

Pros –

The Governance section and a call for an ATSI healing foundation are well argued. Another strong point is the inclusion, at the end of each subsection, of discussion points that raise important questions and issues for consideration.

Cons –

There is a lack of the inclusion of Australian healing programs or content. Feeney rightly makes the point early on that there is a dearth of scholarly articles dealing with Indigenous healing here in Australia. She identifies the fact that the details around what healing programs have taken place here are passed on verbally, very much in an oral tradition.

An overview of this paper is given in the following quote:

“The paper presents a summary of healing practice options suitable for Australian Indigenous people who have suffered the impact of government policies of forced child removal from family, clan and country. The paper also applies to all who have suffered due to the impact of colonisation more generally.” Pg 3.

This report highlights the timing of a focus on healing ‘the past’. The Rudd Governments national apology re the Stolen Generations was both an acknowledgement of past pain caused, and a catalyst for the healing to commence.

The report acknowledges the importance of redressing the issue with financial initiatives but sees that as ‘out of its scope’. It does however give its focus as:

“The focus here looks at options for regeneration work, by developing therapeutic practices and programs that support individual healing and community cultural renewal. The paper

features lessons, insights and ideas from the activities of the Canadian Aboriginal Healing Foundation, but also includes Australian and other literature where available.” Pg.4.

As Feeney states, the calls for healing are for broad, all encompassing healing. Complex causation requires complex healing approaches. Some of these considerations concern “... *how to heal people who have been stripped of their identity, language, connection to country, culture, laws and pride.*” Pg.4.

What we can learn from International attempts at addressing past trauma, grief and loss is that “... *any investment in Indigenous healing needs to be grounded in the Indigenous traditions, values and cultures whilst simultaneously integrating the best of what contemporary evidence-based healing approaches have to offer. This paper explores a range of possibilities that show promise in how to do this.*” Pg.5.

The paper makes an important point about the availability of literature on the issue of Indigenous Australian healing of trauma. Feeney makes the point that it is important “ *to support culturally embedded ways of exchanging and passing on knowledge about healing.*” Pg.6.

In regard to actual healing, Feeney makes the important point that tangible, urgent and necessary decision need to be addressed as a priority, but she rightly acknowledges that the underlying unresolved grief and loss equally needs attention.

Feeney draws from International experience, and the report goes into depth regarding the Canadian Indigenous experience of getting recognition and government commitment (and funding) for healing. “*Canada established their Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF) in 1998 following the federal government committing \$350 million to support community-based healing of the legacy of physical and sexual abuse at residential schools. The AHF became a facilitator of the healing process by promoting awareness, providing resources for healing and nurturing a supportive public environment.*” Pg.9.

The Governance section, Section Six, page 9, is a concrete, thoughtful exploration of how to handle the set-up of these healing programs, where the ownership should lie, and how to organize responsibilities to ultimately streamline healing. Lessons are pinpointed and discussed from International initiatives, especially from the experiences in Canada. Feeney explores the pitfalls of setting up programs, and she outlines the importance of exploring options. She reminds us how important it is to be flexible, and to take an individual approach to each distinct group and community.

One quote that will definitely resonate with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is the following:

“At best, the role of government should be as an enabler or facilitator of healing, not as a controller or director.” Pg.10.

Throughout the report, Feeney seems to be recommending the establishment of an Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation. She in fact states that “...*establishing an Indigenous controlled Healing Foundation, has many advantages*” (pg.10). Three main advantages are highlighted (pg.10):

1. Healing is a journey of empowerment, reclaiming control and self determination.
2. Governance of the process would benefit from specific skills, including those possessed by people who have directly or indirectly suffered the direct or intergenerational impacts of forced removal and have been on their own healing journey.
3. It would be important to have an organisation directing the healing journey process that has the specific constitution for this task.

*** Note that within the ‘Closing the Gap’ strategy, and the Budget 2009/10, an Indigenous Healing Foundation, the Australian Government has committed \$26.6 million over four years for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation.**

Section 7 of the paper is ‘**Proposed Healing Model Logic**’ (page 11). In this section, Feeney utilizes diagrams to illustrate possible outcomes of programmes, including short and long-term goals. The development of this type of logic diagram gives a point of reference to all parties in relation to what can be achieved, especially in relation to the setting up of a healing foundation.

This type of process is also helpful regarding any individual healing projects. It can give a visual representation of the process, and work as a ‘road-map’ or even a summary of the project itself – program planning and evaluation.

In the section ‘**Promising Healing Activities**’ Feeney suggests that the Healing Projects could fall into the following categories:

- Therapeutic Activities
- Strengthening Family and Parenting Skills
- Cultural Renewal
- Training and capacity building
- Research, Evaluation and public education
- Changing Systems, Redefining Social Norms

(pgs 14-17).

“Healing projects should ideally include a combination of individual engagement in therapeutic activities and group involvement in community events that promote well-being.”

Pg 14.

In section 9, Healing Practice Target Groups, Feeney makes the important point that the healing programs and initiatives should be as all-encompassing as possible. They should cater to Stolen Generations survivors and those inter-generationally impacted, but should have specific approaches to cater to the different groups and demographics within this.

“Healing practices should also specifically target a range of groups such as women, men, youth, Elders, incarcerated, gays, lesbians and the homeless” Pg 17.

Feeney supports her assertion that healing programs, and the establishment of any healing body, needs to take into account the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Australians are diverse and varied. As such, programs and initiatives should be similarly diverse, and flexible.

Feeney gives the National Health and Medical Research Council good practice principles as guides for good practice in the possible set up of an over-arching healing foundation.

Some very interesting logistical and ideological issues are raised by Feeney in this section (Section 10) of the report.

Feeney cites a Framework of Healing Trauma in section 11, Potential Healing Outcomes, from the Canadian experience with their Aboriginal Healing Foundation. This sees three 'pillars' of the healing process:

1. Reclaiming history
2. Cultural interventions
3. Therapeutic healing

Feeney ends this section with a quote that can be seen as a good summary for the goal of the healing here in Australia.

“The Need for Healing of Historic trauma is the overarching motive. The promising elements important to achieving this goal would mean funding projects that integrate Indigenous values and world views; establish personal and cultural safety for program participants and offer programs run by people (healers, therapists, Elders, volunteers) with commitment and strong capacity” (pg 23).

Feeney concludes the report with a pertinent quote concerning the future of this co-ordinated healing:

“In conclusion, we would benefit from conceptualising healing as a long journey, not a quick fix solution open to short-term investment. It also needs to be seen as a task requiring some special qualities in the people actually holding out their hand to help others in their healing journey”. (Pg 24).