

# The RACGP Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Project

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The RACGP Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Project is about supporting GPs to improve early detection and management of breast and cervical cancer in Indigenous women.

The objectives are to identify barriers to the provision of effective screening and management of breast and cervical cancer in Aboriginal & TSI women by GPs, to identify strategies which would enable GPs to overcome these barriers, and to develop and implement a plan at the local level which would incorporate potential strategies identified.

## Why is this project needed?

Screening programs for breast and cervical cancer have had considerable success in preventing deaths amongst women in the general Australian population. This success however appears not to have extended so much to indigenous women.

Although data on the incidence of breast and cervical cancer in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are limited, available evidence suggests that they suffer a disproportionate burden from cancer of the cervix. The incidence of cervical cancer in Aboriginal women has been reported as three times that of all Australian women and the mortality up to twelve times higher.

While the incidence of breast cancer in indigenous women may be lower than in non-indigenous women, survival outcomes appear to be poorer, probably due to a lower participation rate in early detection programs and lesser access to services.

The project began in July 2000, with a grant from the Sylvia and Charles Viertel Charitable Foundation. Activities to date have included a review of the literature, consultation with indigenous women and with GPs, discussion with national and state based cancer organisations, and identification of potential strategies to address the barriers to improving early detection and management.

The initial grant has since been supplemented with funds from the Rural Faculty of the RACGP through the General Practice Memorandum of Understanding, as one of a number of projects which support GPs working in remote and rural indigenous communities.

GPs are seen as key primary health care providers who can improve screening rates for breast and cervical cancer in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, yet a number of barriers exist to them maximising this potential. To date, the project has identified a range of barriers, and has developed a number of potential strategies to address those barriers.

These strategies are now being tested at the local level, with implementation at pilot sites in three states (Adelaide, Mackay and Coonamble).

Although there are considerable differences at each site, the focus of activities revolves around the following:

- development of linkages between services to improve access and/or service provision to indigenous women
- facilitation of GP awareness of cross-cultural and indigenous women's health issues
- identification and review of relevant indigenous-specific health promotional resources
- development of needs-based support strategies for improving reminder and recall systems.

Evaluation of the project will help suggest a national framework to support local interventions for improving GP screening and management of breast and cervical cancer in Indigenous women.

The project will run until the end of January 2003 and a report encompassing the findings will be widely distributed.

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