

The Good News

Below are summaries of 5 successful programs that all reduced the number of low birth weight babies and the number of babies born preterm (before 37 weeks).

Mums and Babies Program, Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service (TAIHS), Queensland

In February 2000, TAIHS commenced this new maternal and child health program. A dedicated team of 2 health workers, one childcare worker, a driver and 2 female doctors was set up. The team holds a clinic every morning for young families and pregnant women. This program has successfully improved access to antenatal care services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women: 50% are now presenting before 11 weeks, the number of visits per pregnancy is doubled, the number of women with less than 4 visits has fallen from 65% to 25%. A range of positive outcomes have been observed: births before 37 weeks have fallen significantly from 17% to 9.5%, low birth weight has fallen from 16% to 11.7%, mean birth weight has increased by 170g and perinatal deaths have fallen from 58/1000 to 22/1000.

Mums and Babies Project. Project Report. Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Services Limited. Townsville. 2002.

Strong Women Strong Babies Strong Culture Program, Northern Territory

The Strong Women Strong Babies Strong Culture Program had specific goals to increase infant birth weights by earlier attendance for antenatal care and improved maternal weight status. Starting in August 1993, Aboriginal women in three pilot communities worked with pregnant Aboriginal women in a program that emphasised both traditional practices and Western medicine.

The program aims were:

- to increase attendance for antenatal care in the first trimester to allow identification and modification of factors which might affect the health of the mother or child;
- to introduce nutritional assessment and monitoring into prenatal care with evaluation of their use; and
- to evaluate strategies to improve maternal nutrition success assessed by increased weight gain during pregnancy.

Data from the Northern Territory Midwives Collection shows that in the pilot communities the average birth weight of Aboriginal babies increased by 171 g between 1990/91 and 1994/5 and by only 92 g in the surrounding three rural regions. The prevalence of low birth weight decreased by 8.4% in the pilot communities compared to 1.5% in the non-intervention communities. Preterm births fell by 1.5% in the pilot communities whilst it rose by 1% in the non-intervention areas.

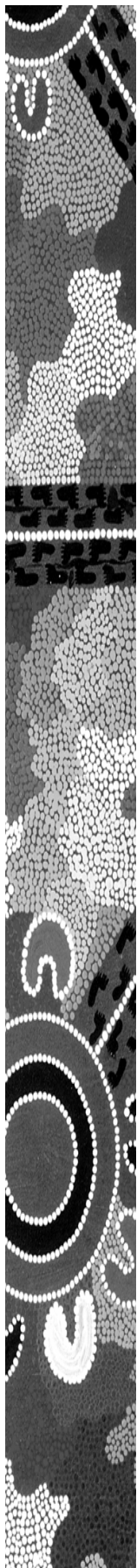
Mackerras D. Birth weight changes in the pilot phase of the Strong Women Strong Babies Strong Culture Program in the Northern Territory. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health. 25(1):34-40. 2001.

Unfortunately in later intervention groups no significant increase in mean birth weight or reduction in low birth weight was observed.

D'Espaignet ET, Measey ML, Carnegie MA, Mackerras D. Monitoring the 'Strong Women, Strong babies, Strong Culture program': The first 8 years. Journal of Paediatric Child Health. 39:668-672. 2003.



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Nganampa Health Council Antenatal Care Program 1984-1996, Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands, South Australia.

In the mid 1980s Nganampa Health Council developed a strategy to improve antenatal care for women in their region. It was based on the development of a care record system for antenatal patients to use in all clinics. It introduced standard protocols for antenatal care, birthing and child health care. An independent study reviewed the performance between 1984 and 1996. This noted that perinatal mortality had decreased from 45.2/1000 to 8.6/1000. The proportion of low birth weight babies decreased from 14.2% to 8.1%. Mean birth weight increased from 3,080g to 3,183g.

Slovan D, Shelley J, Watson L, Lumley J. Obstetric and Child Health Outcomes on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands, 1984-1996: A preliminary analysis. Proceedings of the 5th National Rural Health Conference, Adelaide, 14-17 March 1999. National Rural Health Alliance. 1999.

Kintore (Walungurru) Nutrition Program 1998-2001, Alice Springs, Northern Territory

This community based nutrition project provided: education sessions for nutrition workers, mothers and health staff; child growth monitoring; and a community meals program providing breakfast and lunch for children. The impact of importance here is that the incidence of low birth weight was 35% in the community between 1995 and June 1998, and was 8% from 1998 to 2001. The project did not specifically target pregnant women, and it is unclear whether the project caused the decline. The project was assessed as cost effective particularly due to the reduction in hospitalisations for gastroenteritis and nutrition problems among the young children but it would also have been cost effective through reductions in low birth weight babies if it could be proved to have been the cause of the large observed change.

Warchivker I. An analysis of a community response to child nutrition problems at Kintore (Walungurru) 1998-2001. Centre for Remote Health, Alice Springs. 2003.

Congress Alukura Women's Health Program, Alice Springs, Northern Territory

Congress Alukura is a women's health and birthing centre developed in the 1980's to address the needs of Aboriginal women in Central Australia. A large proportion of Aboriginal mothers use Alukura for antenatal care (in 1994, 98% of urban women and 18% of rural). The services include the provision of culturally appropriate antenatal, intrapartum, postnatal and women's health care through a midwifery led Maternity Service and Women's Health Clinic. The service includes home visiting, transport, specialist/hospital liaison, limited mobile bush service and adult and youth health education.

The program employs a full-time Medical Officer, Midwives, Women's Health Nurse, Liaison Officer, Educators, Traditional Grandmothers and administrative/support staff.

Mean birth weight of Aboriginal infants in the Alice Springs urban area was:

- 3,168g in 1986-90,
- 3,271g in 1991-95, and
- 3,268g in 1996-99.

This was an increase of 103g and 100g respectively above the 1986-90 baseline.

Ah Chee D, Alley S, Milera S. Congress Alukura – women's business. Proceedings of the 4th Australian Women's Health Conference, Adelaide, 19-21 February 2001:167-174; and Carter E, Lumley J, Wilson G, Bell S. 'Alukura ... for my daughters and their daughters and their daughters'. A review of Congress Alukura. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health. 28:229-34. 2004.



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