The Role of Environmental Health Workers

Clare Bailey  I'm just going to say a few words about environmental health work in Queensland.

In Queensland we have about 50 or 60 Indigenous Environmental Health Workers. Most of these are based in the Torres Strait and the Cape. Queensland Health employs three Indigenous Environmental Health Coordinators in public health services, and they are based in each of the public health zones—one in Cairns, one in Rockhampton and one in Toowoomba. There are also a couple of district Environmental Health Coordinators employed at Weipa and on Thursday Island looking after the Torres Strait. They have a proper position/job description and a proper wage. The others are still on CDEP (Community Development and Employment Program), with the exception of one at Bamaga.

The Tropical North Queensland TAFE course has a number of different entry levels. If you are doing a certificate in primary health care, you can progress through your diploma to an advanced diploma which is then articulated to the degree course in environmental health at Hawkesbury University. So if you want to continue your career in environmental health, you can come out at the other end with a degree in applied science.

We’ve been working pretty hard to develop a position description for Environmental Health Workers in Queensland which includes a range of duties around water, sanitation, housing infrastructure, waste management, pest management, food safety and animal control. In the Queensland setting, Environmental Health Workers are pretty well placed to either run a program or oversee/coordinate programs in communities.

The only formal dog program operating at the moment run by the Environmental Health Workers is on Yan Island in the Torres Strait. It has been reasonably successful. The Torres Shire contracts a vet to come up from Cairns, and some of the other communities have got together to access that service. But as far as I know there is no other formal dog program happening in any communities in Queensland.

Rick Speare  Is there formal training on dog health programs during the course?

Clare Bailey  I think there may be a module within the Environmental Health Worker training, but no stand-alone certificate in animal management. It would be really good to see that because it could potentially create another employment opportunity in a community. In all communities economic development is the biggest thing on the agenda at the moment.

Jack Shield  How do administrators in Queensland Health, and how do the 50 or 60 individual Health Workers, see the possibility of Health Workers being more involved in actually being responsible for managing the programs, in having responsibility for use of S4 drugs and Covinan and stuff like that? Can we see at any stage that they may be the prime movers of the dog health programs in Queensland?

Clare Bailey  Jack, as you know I’m lousy at the rules. I might hand over to Alan on this one.

Alan Dick (Tropical Public Health, Cairns)  Up in the Torres Strait there are a couple of people who got authorisation to use these drugs. I think there is the possibility of individuals applying through the Health Department to be in possession of S4 drugs. I can’t see any wholesale changes coming in the immediate future. That could happen, but they are very slow to change things with those authorities, as you know. It would be very much a one-on-one case. If there was an individual who was involved in that area and was able to demonstrate a knowledge of the drug he was using and how to administer it . . . I think in the case of the Torres Strait they got a letter of
recommendation through a vet they had been working with, saying they could use these things properly and were getting trained in that area. So I imagine that’s where it is at the moment. I can’t see a wholesale change happening.

Geoff Shaw In relation to Environmental Health Workers, it seems to me there is a heavy concentration on the northern and eastern seaboard of Queensland, but nothing much towards the north-west, places like Domagi, Mt Isa, Bourketown and so on.

Clare Bailey There is actually a new position for an Environmental Health Worker at Mt Isa that should be filled in October and another position coming up in Longreach. But you are absolutely right; they are predominantly based in the areas you named. I’ve recently moved to Central Queensland and I’m having great difficulty convincing councils of the need to employ Environmental Health Workers. Yes, we are working on it, but the progress is slow.

Philip Donohoe I’d like to give a sketch of the Environmental Health Workers I have worked with in East Arnhem. Through direct grants to local government, Territory Health Services (THS) sponsors 11 Environmental Health Worker positions. I have worked with Billy Gumana in Numbulwar and Keith Lapalung in Milngimbi. They are the two THS-sponsored Environmental Health Workers in East Arnhem. And I have worked with Yambapal and Garrupu, who are Environmental Health Workers from Galiwin’ku and are employed through the CDEP program. Galiwin’ku has always had a high commitment to the Environmental Health Worker program which has continued over the last six years.

The Environmental Health Worker Program in the Northern Territory has been operating for seven or eight years and there are two workers per region. The regions are East Arnhem, Darwin Rural, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs. The great thing about the program is that we do have it. It has been reviewed and someone has even written a PhD looking at the transition from the Hygiene Worker Program, which commenced a long time ago in Katherine, to the Environmental Health Worker program today. So there is good documentation about it.11

My work with the Environmental Health Worker program has been using dog health programs as a vehicle to deal with other issues. That’s where I agree with Kathryn Wilkes’ approach in that you do have success with dog programs because the health of the dog is improved. And with clear communication I’ve always found that community members are very supportive of someone bothering to care for their dogs.

I’ve used Megan Thomas at Milngimbi; Rick Speare has conducted dog health, education and training and work at Ramingining; Stephen Cutter and Jenny Wells have delivered a veterinary service as well as education and training across all communities in East Arnhem (nine main communities). Rick Speare attended an Environmental Health Worker conference last year where he was the key speaker and support speaker to encourage environmental health work.

Environmental Health Workers in the Northern Territory are also involved in NAHS [National Aboriginal Health Strategy] projects. The people I’ve worked with have been involved with Meliodosis education, scabies education. We have a store in Yirrkala that is the first accredited store under Food Safe, which is a national approach to food handling. We’ve been involved in kava education. Different workers have different approaches: some like getting their hands dirty, sticking their hands down toilets; others, like my brother Lapalung from Milngimbi—I call him a general because he loves organising other people and gets things done that way. The Northern Territory is

hosting the National Environment Health Worker conference to be held in Alice Springs later this year.

It was rather fortuitous that Lapalung telephoned me last night to talk about some things. As I was talking with him I said, ‘Do you mind if I talk to these people about what you’re saying to me?’ He said, ‘You definitely tell these people what I’m telling you.’ So in a sense Lapalung is here with us, and that makes me feel rather proud; in a way we’ve got Billy Gumana and Keith Lapalung involved with the conference. They are people I have worked with over the last six years, and to me that’s very rewarding.

The positive thing about working with people across cultures is that we have successes. Unfortunately we have some stumbling blocks as well. Keith has just had funding pulled for a variety of reasons. That’s being renegotiated today, and I guess he was calling me for a bit of support and encouragement that he was on the right track. He asked me to speak to you because he didn’t fully understand why the money was taken away for a short time; he didn’t understand what he was doing wrong. Fortunately there are people to take time and talk him through that, because the government will not allocate money without appropriate reports and activity sheets and some measurement on how programs are being developed.

He said this:

I’ve tried to use my mind as a filing cabinet, as a computer, but I can’t do that. In the old days, in the past, the old people would sit around the campfire, where we would exchange knowledge and share the traditional way. But I went from the campfire to the filing cabinet and the computer and the embers of the fire died down. The old people assembled at that fire and we discussed the law, we have clan groups and we build shelters. We have representatives from those clan groups. We sit, we consult, we drop those knowledge barriers so we can completely understand where we are. I am looking back to the campfire which has now died. The filing cabinet and the computer are not as good as that campfire. I’m going to sit back around that campfire and start that fire again.

We have this boss relationship that we should share with Balanda [non-Aboriginal people]. I don’t want this boss man acting like a constable coming to us with a cane or a gun or treating us like children. I guess we don’t have canes and guns these days, but we might have reports or we might have the money taken away. I’m going to sit and assemble with Balanda around the campfire. I’m going to use the correct procedure for knowledge. I’m putting behind me the bad times because I need people to respect me and we need to respect them as we share this knowledge. We are going to go back to this traditional way with 15 Mala [clan] leaders where our clans are represented and where the communication is clear. I want some government people, maybe eight people; I want a cultural consultant to support and empower us because when things don’t go well, we don’t know. If the administration fails we don’t know. I want the cultural consultant to help us, to be a light to us, to guide our community with communication so we can do good work, whether that be ATSIC, the Northern Territory government, anyone. I’ve come out of this crisis and I’m going back to the campfire.

That blew me away. Keith’s a very impressive character, and Billy and Brando [Yambapal] would probably say similar things, that together we have done things side-by-side. I refuse to treat people as children; they’re adults and I’m adult; they teach me things and I teach them things. And together we go from one place to another.