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New oral health resources for 'Deadly Teeth'



PORTLAND
DISTRICT HEALTH

Aboriginal Health Workers at Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation in South-West Victoria are spreading deadly messages to promote oral health, with support from the Health Promotion Unit at Portland District Health. The "Deadly Teeth" health promotion initiative has produced a set of three colourful, culturally appropriate Tip Cards for Families promoting oral health for children aged up to seven years and their parents and Families. The resources were officially launched at Winda Mara on Wednesday 06th July 2011, during NAIDOC week celebrations.



The Tip Cards for Families promote three key oral health messages. The 'Eat well' tip card promotes healthy eating behaviours because 'deadly teeth need good foods'. The 'Drink well' tip card highlights the importance of drinking tap water and avoiding 'bad drinks that rot your teeth'. The 'Clean well' tip card reminds children and families that 'deadly teeth need good care' and encourages regular tooth brushing habits.

Three years ago Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation worked in partnership with the Health Promotion Team at Portland District Health and Dental Health Services Victoria to pilot the *Smiles4Miles* oral health program in three local Indigenous playgroup sites. The program workers soon realised that there were no culturally appropriate oral health promotion resources for the local Indigenous community.

In response, four oral health art workshops were held at Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation in Heywood. These were attended by children, Families, Elders, Aboriginal Health Workers, a local artist and the *Smiles4Miles* project worker from Portland District Health.

Indigenous artist Dan Joseph attended the last workshop and became inspired by the children's thoughts and ideas. Using his talent he created three acrylic paintings depicting key oral health messages based on a Western diet. The paintings feature an Indigenous "Wellbeing Fella" collecting bush foods, drinking water from a stream and brushing his teeth. These were interpretations of the *Smiles4Miles* defenders of the tooth characters Munch Girl, Water Boy and Brush Boy. The art work and copyright was purchased from Daniel Joseph by Portland District Health in late 2009.

More workshops were held in the community to finalise the key messages using culturally appropriate language and words that were easy to understand. A graphic designer was then employed to put together all the ideas gathered from the community.

The "Deadly Teeth" initiative addresses oral health as a 'holistic' concept focusing on oral hygiene, nutritional intake, oral health literacy and access to dental services. High-quality oral health is a requirement for holistic health, comfort and a positive trait for the whole of life. Poor oral health is associated with pain, infection, discomfort and embarrassment, impacting on essential daily practices such as chewing, swallowing, speech and sleep. Good oral health improves communication, self-esteem, mental health and overall health and wellbeing.

Traditionally Indigenous Australians had fewer incidents of oral disease. However, the introduction of Western diets has led to an increase in dental decay. Today Indigenous Australian communities have unique oral health needs and are a population at higher risk. Indigenous children now have higher levels of oral health issues than non-indigenous children, with incidents of dental decay being between 2 to 5 times higher. Dental caries (decay) are largely preventable but many go untreated resulting in it being the highest preventable hospital admission among children in Victoria.

Children are dependent on parents and Family to support their oral health. Inadequate access to culturally appropriate oral health information, resources, services and oral health literacy limits the ability of Family to care for their children's overall health needs.

Healthy messages delivered to parents of a new born child have the potential to be adopted by the rest of the Family. The earlier the health messages can be introduced the more likely the success. Good oral health habits can never be started too early.

Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation is a health and cultural service for the local Gunditjmara people living in the Heywood and Hamilton district areas across south-west Victoria. The links between the Gunditjmara people and their land, community and spirit is fundamental to health. Paying recognition and consideration to these connections is vital to all local health promotion initiatives. The "Deadly Teeth" health promotion initiative aims to generate messages that are stimulating, enjoyable and effective.

Creating the resources would not have been possible without the work, support and continued dedication of CEO Michael Bell and the staff and community members at Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation, including Melissa Lillyst, Daryl Rose, Ros Pevit, Dianne Bell, Tanya Geier, Janice Huggers and Lynette Sailor. Recognition goes to the commitment of collaborative partners within the Health Promotion Team at Portland District Health and Dental Health Services Victoria. "I'm proud of the partnerships formed and acknowledge and appreciate the drive from Elders, Family and staff from Winda-Mara", says Lynda Smith, Project Worker from Portland District Health. Lynda would also like to recognise the support of local graphic designer Damon Yuill and the Program Print Company in Hamilton, for their support and efforts to produce the final resources.



Photo: Michael Bell CEO at Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation with Health Practice Manager Janice Huggers at the launch of the 'Deadly Teeth' Tip Cards for Families

For further enquiries or to order the resources contact Lynda Smith, Health Promotion Officer at Portland District Health by email (lsmith.pdh@swarh.vic.gov.au) or phone (03 5522 1198).