



# Award winning ideas bringing telehealth into community

The University of Queensland



The University of Queensland's Centre for Online Health (COH)<sup>1</sup> has been engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for nearly two decades, forming lasting collaborative relationships with community-controlled health services to enable more equitable access to healthcare.

Achievements are reflected in the pioneering work establishing a telehealth-supported screening program for school-age children at risk of ear disease in Cherbourg – and subsequent

projects that have inspired new telehealth services for people living with other chronic health conditions such as diabetes and dementia.

## **Innovative telehealth - enabled models of care to address ear disease**

In 2007, during yarns with the Cherbourg community health service, concerns about the number of children experiencing ear disease were raised. No formal surveillance program was available to help identify the early signs of ear disease, and to facilitate treatment. A mobile screening clinic with telehealth functionality was designed, built and commissioned for use in community<sup>2,3</sup>.

The service was managed locally by a senior Aboriginal health worker from the Cherbourg health service.

Clinical information (video-otoscopic images, audiometry testing, history) was collected by the health worker and stored in a secure online database. An ENT specialist located in Brisbane then used this database to diagnose ear disease, recommend treatment, and/or refer to the local medical services as appropriate. Since official commencement in 2009, more than 4500 children have been screened for ear disease in 35 schools in the region. The service continues to provide regular ear screening tests for children in the community, sharing information with local health services to facilitate faster diagnoses and more efficient treatments for Indigenous children.

**Note: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this article contains the names and images of people who have passed away.**

## Benefits for the community

The telehealth ear screening service in Cherbourg allows more timely diagnosis and treatment of ear disease in Aboriginal children, which has a profound effect on their health, wellbeing, education and social development, while allowing the children to receive services in the community where they have support, and where family and school routines need not be interrupted.

Telehealth has resulted in a much more balanced approach in the way health services are delivered within community settings. This approach is patient-centred and culturally appropriate, and enhances leadership and continuity of care in local primary care settings<sup>4</sup>.

## Importance of collaboration

Engagement with stakeholders (including community members, health staff, managers and Elders) has resulted in a collaborative approach to addressing major health challenges. All projects conducted by the COH focus on transparency and sustainability. COH prioritises work that results in direct and meaningful benefits for communities.

Collaboration is always best done in person, and a significant amount of

time is invested by the COH for in-person meetings with stakeholders in each community. These meetings are mostly informal, but very important to gain an appreciation of the unique characteristics of each community. No two communities are the same. Aside from the research planning, the opportunity to build relationships has been essential – so there is a genuine understanding of community priorities, how something might be done and what would be required to adequately support the service.

Once a clinical area is prioritised, meetings are held with community stakeholders. Information is shared within each community through local meetings and brochures that explain each project; and community presentations where activities can be planned together, findings can be discussed and opportunities shared between all stakeholders. The engagement process is a learning opportunity for all involved.

*“We dedicate the Engagement Australia Award to our friend and former colleague Mr Cecil Brown (Pickle). Pickle was a senior Aboriginal health worker and leader within the Cherbourg Community Health Service, who was instrumental in pioneering the mobile ear screening service in Cherbourg - almost 15 years ago. Sadly, Pickle passed in December 2021, but leaves a shining legacy for his community”.*  
Professor Anthony Smith.

## References

1. Centre for Online Health, The University of Queensland, Australia (homepage), <https://coh.centre.uq.edu.au/>, last checked 27 April 2022
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3. Smith AC, Armfield NR, Wu W-I, Brown CA, Perry C. A mobile telemedicine-enabled ear screening service for Indigenous children in Queensland: activity and outcomes in the first three years. *Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare*. 2012;18(8):485-489.





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The University of Queensland  
The Centre for Online Health received  
the 2021 Engagement Australia  
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Engagement.

