

Art centres are used to facilitate broader social, health and community objectives: an example

Research Project

Art Centres – Supporting our Elders: A Good News Story.

Aims

Art Centres - Supporting our Elders was a participatory research study funded by a Department of Health Dementia and Aged Care (DACs) Innovation grant from 2017-2021. The study sought to understand how three Aboriginal community controlled art centres support their older artists; to ascertain if they are collaborating with their local aged care providers; and if so, to determine what can be learnt from these collaborations.

Partners

The study was a partnership between the National Ageing Research Institute (NARI) and three Aboriginal community controlled art centres:

- Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency, Fitzroy Crossing, WA
- Ikuntji Artists, Haasts Bluff, NT
- Tjanpi Desert Weavers of the NPY Women's Council, Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Lands, WA, SA and NT.

We also partnered with two aged care providers and two universities:

- Kimberley Aged and Community Services, WA Country Health Services, Kimberley, WA
- Tjungu Aged and Disability Team of the NPY Women's Council, Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Lands, WA, SA and NT
- University of Western Australia
- Flinders University.

Method

99 people participated in semi-structured interviews and focus groups: 50 artists from the three centres; 25 staff of art centres; 24 aged care staff.

53 people responded to a national survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait community controlled art centres.

Results

We learnt that art centres foster **intergenerational connection** and nurture **wellbeing and healing** across the lifecourse. Aboriginal community controlled art centres keep their Elders strong and connected in many ways. Art centres are **community hubs and safe spaces** that nurture people's roles and relationships with Country, community and family, **keeping generations connected** and learning from one another. They provide older artists with **direct care** and assist people to **access health and aged care services**. Older people play a strong role in their governance structures, meaning **cultural values inform every aspect of their operation**. We have synthesised key findings of this study to be:

1. Elders are at the foundation of the art centres.
2. Older artists are the senior artists, role models and 'superstars'.
3. The centres prioritise the role of Elders by creating a space where intergenerational connection, teaching and learning, and leaving a legacy are key drivers of their engagement.
4. Elders are integral to the governance systems of art centres. Culture, Country, kin, language and storytelling are embedded into these systems and everything they do.
5. Art Centres work hard to build and maintain relationships of trust and reciprocal models of care.
6. They retain a local workforce and they are in an ideal position to notice physical and cognitive changes in older artists and work with them to promote social, emotional and cognitive wellbeing.

7. The centres are immersed in their Country's context and the history of their community.
8. Art centres are considered a safe space, a place of healing and respite, and a place for everyone. They reduce stigma associated with dementia and functional decline; they promote a sense of belonging.
9. Art centres play an enormous role in delivering day to day care needs of older artists. They also facilitate social connection, spiritual and cognitive wellbeing.
10. Many art centres are collaborating with aged care providers and have identified the potential to enhance these collaborations to better meet the needs of older artists and their families. This includes sharing infrastructure, organising joint trips to Country, sharing staffing and expertise across sites.

The challenges

Art Centres care for older artists and artists with dementia in the context of:

1. No formal recognition or resourcing
2. Expectations of care from Elders and community
3. Poorly designed or inadequate infrastructure.

How can the economic social and contributions that arts and crafts make to communities be maximised?

1. Providing government support for innovations in shared, flexible and sustainable resourcing for supporting older artists, e.g. staffing, money, supplies, cars, trips to Country, accessible buildings.
2. Acknowledging and resourcing the expertise of the art centre workforce. Staff are trusted by their communities, and can not only collaborate with services such as aged care and health providers, but also help an older person navigate and access existing systems.
3. Facilitating education, training, and more information on conditions associated with ageing.
4. Supporting increased connection between young and older people to teach and share knowledge and facilitate a lifecourse approach to health and wellbeing.
5. Work to enable shared models of care for artists to continue to practice their roles and responsibilities via their local art centre even after admission to residential care.

Study Outcomes

Arts Centres Supporting our Elders, an audio visual resource, is one of the study's major material outcomes. It was launched by Minister Ken Wyatt at the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair on the 6th of August 2021: <https://www.nari.net.au/art-centres-supporting-elders-a-good-news-story>

Next Steps

We are seeking investment to translate the evidence and evaluate integrated and shared models of care with aged care providers, so that older artists can continue to practice their vital roles and responsibilities within their centres and communities as they age.

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