

## **A Submission regarding the Inquiry into Community Safety, Support Services and Job Opportunities in the Northern Territory**

### **'Closing the Gap Yanangu Way'**

#### **To the Chair and Committee Members.**

My name is Monica Nangala Robinson, I come from Walungurru (Kintore) in the NT. Currently I am chair of the Pintupi Homelands Health Service (PHHS), a Central Land Council delegate and chair of our Macdonnell Shire local authority. I retired in 2016 after forty years of work with the NT Education Department.

This submission is a personal submission to your inquiry on behalf of myself and a group of Elders and Leaders from the Pintupi – Luritja lands of Central Australia. This group of leaders and elders includes Irene Nangala from Walungurru (Kintore). Violet Napanangka from Amunturrngu (Mt Liebig). Linda Nakamarra Allen and Punaṯa Stockman Nungurrayi from Papunya with Douglas Multa Tjupurrula from Ikuntji (Haasts Bluff). Most of us have health issues and consider that the window of opportunity to pass on to a younger generation what we have learnt and received from our elders is diminishing. There is an urgent need within our submission. We are being helped with this submission by Jeff Hulcombe who has lived and worked with us since 1980 and has supported our work throughout this time.

The reason for a personal submission is because we wish the committee to understand that what we submit to you is knowledge which belongs to us as Yanangu. It does not belong to any research institution or individual researcher. Nor does it belong to any particular organisation, although, as we will point out below, there are two organisations which operate within our region which, under our direction, have adopted aspects of our knowledge as a basis for their operations and aspirations.

We also wish to apologise for the lateness of this submission. We only became aware of your committee recently while attending the AGM for the Purple House on the 8-9<sup>th</sup> December. The same days you were conducting a hearing in Alice Springs. So, what we present has been hastily put together, but we hope no less relevant for this. Our submission may take a different approach to some of the submissions you have received.

When we think about community, we understand that as being Yanangu. So, when it comes to talking about community safety, we are talking about Yanangu safety. What we would therefore like the committee to consider throughout our submission, specifically in regard to Community Safety, is how we as Yanangu describe this, the historical and current nature

of the threat to our Community Safety and how we consider our Community Safety and thus a stronger future can be assured.

Moreover, we would like the committee to keep in mind that no matter the policy or program developed at a National or Territory level, if it does not work on the ground at a community level then it is a waste of time, effort, and money. And leaves us stuck with the status quo. Further, when thinking about health and improved outcomes, it is a truth about health care that to produce an effective treatment you need to first have a correct diagnosis of the problem. If not, then the treatment provided simply becomes maltreatment. In this submission, we wish to provide you our diagnosis and the remedy we recommend.

What we submit to you below is a modified version of a presentation to the 16<sup>th</sup> National Rural Health Conference held in late July in Brisbane this year and more recently to the Desert Knowledge Australia Symposium held in Alice Springs in November 2022. If given the opportunity, we would be more than happy to undertake a similar presentation to your committee.

### **Executive Summary**

In Central Australia, many First Nation People who share similar values describe themselves as Yaṇangu or Aṇangu. These values we know also apply to many other first Nation People, although they may use different words to explain.

Since 1986, in the Pintupi - Luritja Lands of Central Australia, we have been conducting a longitudinal Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) cycle, based upon our cultural knowledge, examining symbolic texts which speak to Reconciliation and Close the Gap and how these may be practically achieved from a Yaṇangu perspective.

This work has been reflected in a number of historical events and documents. However, our efforts to achieve the above objectives have been relentlessly resisted by Governments, causing great stress, trauma and injury to Yaṇangu and the breaking of our spirit (kurrunpa).

One success of our efforts though has been the establishment of Western Desert Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Tjuṭaku (WDNWPT) Aboriginal Corporation. Today this organisation is more commonly referred to as the Purple House. WDNWPT was initially established to combat the continuing and growing epidemic of End Stage Renal Disease (ESRD).

Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Tjuṭaku though means 'making all our families well'. This shows that those who fought and worked for the establishment of this organisation had a much broader mission and vision beyond the concern of providing remote dialysis services.

This is now our mission and vision received from our elders. To build upon the success of their achievements and to pass this knowledge on to a younger generation and to offer them hope of a future as they determine. So, they then may take this Yaṇangu knowledge and translate it into practical outcomes which will meet their aspirations in a contemporary world.



This we have been endeavouring to do over the last years. We reactivated our CBPAR and have been working to bring a younger group into this process so they may learn and carry on as Yanangu leaders. But to be able to continue we need active support and positive participation from government for this to work.

Not opposition or apathy as in the past.

Governments now have the onus upon them of earning the trust of Yanangu. To do so they must respond in a spirit of respect and cooperation with generosity and immediacy.

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### Our Proposal

One of the key concerns it seems of those seeking to oppose the Voice to Parliament, is how it will translate into benefits for remote communities.

What we can offer in response to this is a model which demonstrates how this can work and has evidence of its capacity to not only Close the Gap but also open a Gap on the National Average. This model is wholistic in its approach and based upon what can be described as Yanangu determinants of self, health and well-being. Moreover, what we can also show in progressing this model is that it will be based upon best practice in research with First Nation groups.

However, to build upon this success will require a real commitment from all levels of government with tangible inputs as directed by Yanangu. In the first instance it will require formalising a Voice within the region encompassing at least initially the communities and outstations of the Haasts Bluff Land Trust (HBALT) with the resources and facilities to operate at an effective level.

We have already established the basis of this Voice. With us as community and regional elders and leaders, coupled with a group of younger and emerging leaders drawn from the four main communities, we have both community and regional representation. This latter

group will form the basis of the community-based research teams, who will be led by a research leader from the elder team.

The authority of this Voice will need to be recognised at both a community and regional level. To this effect work with existing local governance structures to ensure such agreement and direction has already commenced.

Further, recognition of the authority of this Voice will need to be enabled to work with current regional governance arrangements, such as the Central Land Council, the Macdonnell Shire Council and NT Government initiatives within their Local Decision Making (LDM) framework. This process has also already commenced.

Critically, recognition of this Voice by all governments as the primary source of advice and direction on all matters related to Yangu Safety, Community development and Yangu wellbeing within the region is essential. We imagine this to be a progressive transition.

Finally, if possible, would-be long term and bi-partisan commitment to this Voice.

Having all of these criteria being met would be a very good start to progressing on a stronger future for Yangu

A way this might be envisaged is similar to the failed COAG trials introduced during the intervention. This however would not be a trial designed and led by government but one designed and led by Yangu.

For too long Yangu and their organisations have been expected and required to work **with** governments. This approach has obviously failed and now needs to be turned around. What governments need to do now is learn how to work **with** Yangu not against them.

### **Historical Background**

In 1986, a number of us then working in the Walungurru School saw a problem in the education of our children. At that time, we considered the school more a walypala school, run by walypala ideas and authority. We wanted to change this and make sure our children would have the chance to be educated in two ways, Yangu Way and walypala way. This was for our children's future so that they could be confident and strong in two worlds. We wanted a Two-Way education system and curriculum for our children supportive of their growth as Yangu.

With the assistance of a research fellow from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) by the name of Kevin Keffe we then began a Yangu Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) cycle. A cycle we have continued with to this very day.

Keffe documented this initial work in his book Keffe, K. (1992). *From the centre to the city: Aboriginal education, culture and power*. Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra. However, we documented our work in the following text.





This was our education plan, our Two – Way education plan, and is still our plan because it is something we know and understand can work for all our benefit.

Thinking about Yanangu Way, we thought about the most important things for Yanangu and what our children needed to learn and how the school and education system should support our knowledge. To do this we needed to see Yanangu values in the education of our children.

These main Yanangu values are Ngurra, Walytja, Tulku, Nintintjaku and Kulintjaku. A brief translation of these values is as follows.

**NGURRA** – *Land, country, home, camp, place.*

**WALYTJA** - *Family, kin, what belongs to you or what you belong to e.g., language, country.*

**TULKU** - *Songs, ceremonies, dances, often conflated with Tjukurrpa- commonly referred to as The Dreaming.*

**KULINTJAKU** – *To hear, listen, think, understand.*

**NINTINTJAKU** – *To learn, to show, to teach, to know.*

It is important to understand here that nintintjaku and kulintjaku, is a process of learning and understanding of the other three values and how they and us interrelate as people. So, this is a process of education we are involved in from life to death either as a learner or a teacher. This educative process highlights why our elders are so important to us as holders of knowledge. And as a process it is therefore a dynamic, able to adapt and adjust as new knowledge is incorporated. It also helps explain why education is such an important issue for us. Since colonisation though this adaptive process has been under extreme stress, having to constantly react to interference and interventions.

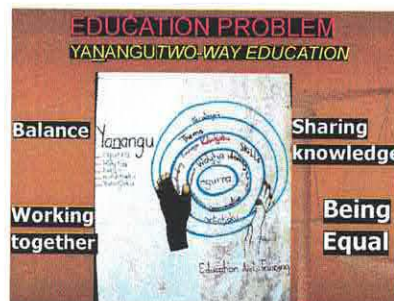
These Yanangu values are important for our children's identity, well-being and a stronger future. You can think of them also as the Yanangu determinants of self, health and well-being. It was through the translation of these values that the Purple House evolved and now has several of them as core values within its Strategic Plan. However, we did have to raise our own money so we could develop an approach based upon our values. Government

would not to do this and in the early days was resistant to our approach. And this unique approach to addressing the epidemic of End Stage Renal Disease (ESRD) afflicting our families that the Purple House adopted, clearly demonstrates that having our values directing service provision will not only 'close the gap' but also has the ability to open a gap upon the national average (Appendix A).

As one of the Purple House Directors explained back in 2004

***"It's more than machines and medicine  
– they should understand there's  
an Yanangu way"  
(BW 2004)***

Our Two-Way plan below tells the story of what we were thinking at the time and how these two hands should work according to our knowledge. At that time we read this plan as Working Together, Being Equal, Sharing Knowledge and achieving Balance.



However, we when reviewed this document in 1988, as students studying in the then Batchelor College Remote Area Teacher Education (RATE) program, we realised a bigger problem. What we found was that in fact this symbol, as currently constructed, is one of Injury to us as Yanangu.

When we did our re-reading and asked if these two hands are really in balance, what we knew is that the right-hand side hand

- Does not really understand what it has its hand upon.
- It always wants to do things its own way.
- It is always changing; staff change, governments change, policies and laws keep changing.
- So, things are not equal between these two hands.
- and there is no balance.

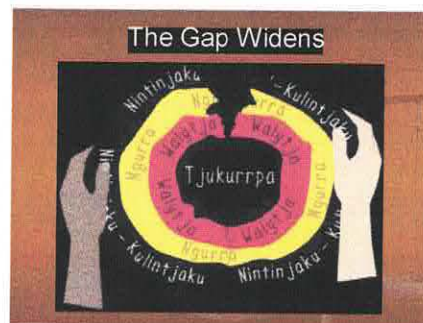


And while we try to hold onto our values the impact of this is that it is tearing apart what is being held here. What this is doing to us is kurrunpa kilytjukatinyi, the breaking of our spirit.

Medical people might describe this as Stress, Trauma or Injury. This is the historical and continuing threat to our safety.



And after many years of this effect, it has caused the Gap in our kurrunpa – our spirit, to widen. And for Yanangu “kurrunpa is everything” (Zimran, J.,10/10/2020).



This is the Gap we must close to see our health and well-being restored.

But for this to happen it needs to be done Yanangu Way. To continue to do otherwise is maltreatment.

Later on, the answer to this problem of our kurrunpa kilytjukatinyi was given to us by our elders in the words Yanangu Lingkitu Ngalula. And this is the next text that shows what these words mean to us.





These words and text tell us to hold on strongly to what is important to us as Yanangu.

- That is to hold on strongly to those five key determinants of Yanangu self, health and well-being.  
Ngurra,  
Walytja,  
Tulku / Tjukurrpa,  
Through the process of  
Kulintjaku and  
Nintintjaku, as shown in our two-way plan.

Having these values and all they mean back in Yanangu hands connects our past to our future. It also then protects our kurrumpa, our spirit from the hand that does not understand. This is how Yanangu have lived for thousands of years. And how we have been able to survive for millennia in the harshest of climates. And the old people told us this is also our future as Yanangu.

So, this symbol of our hands holding onto and looking after what is important to us, is what we need to stop our kurrumpa kilytjukatinyi and keep our spirit alive, our kurrumpa kana. These words are now incorporated into the logo of the Pintupi Homelands Health Service. In so doing they provide the shield to keep our community safe and repair our spirit.



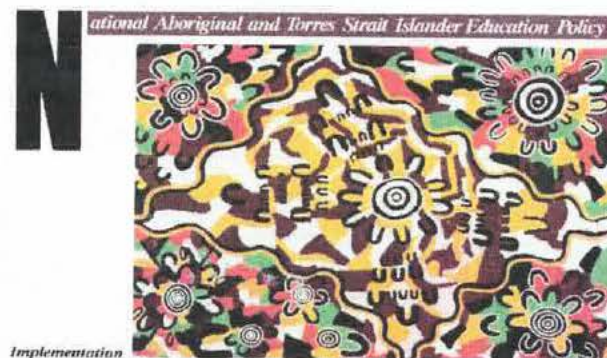


Then in 1988, myself, my husband and two others, who have sadly passed away, were invited to Canberra to speak of our work at an Australian Educational Union conference.

This is the conference paper we presented.

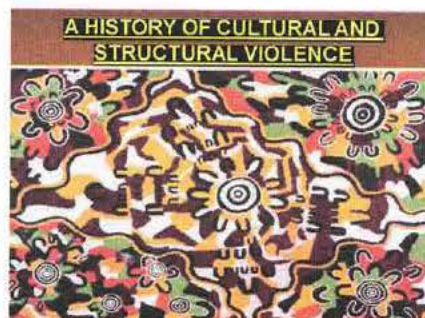


This text explains in more historical detail how our kurrunpa, our safety has been impacted over time and the Gap widened. Importantly though, in its last chapter at the bottom left, it also shows the way our spirit can be restored, but it does require the rest of Australia to support and work with us in the way we need to go. Our work then became the promotional face for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. So, our work was of National significance.



A copy and translation of this text is included Kevin Keffe's book.

However, a more in-depth reading of this work indicates how since colonisation we have been and remain subjected to a regime of cultural and structural violence.



In summary, what this text describes is how policy and legislation has pared back the spirit, the well-being of Yanangu, much like you might describe as death by a thousand cuts. This

work further depicts a metaphor of those structural barriers in existence throughout these policy periods. It is against these barriers that we have been and continue to bash our minds and bodies, compounding Injury upon Injury and continuing to block us in our efforts towards restoring our spirit and well-being.

The following model has been put together by Jeff Hulcombe. It again explains in more specific terms how our community safety, our kurrumpa has been impacted over time and how we have tried to resist these threats in order to retain and restore our well-being.



\*Mara means hand.

Some of the history detailed above of our more localised efforts to hold on strongly to our values and keep our spirit strong, may not be known to all members of the committee. This history though is important for it shows we have not been passive in our response to the attacks upon our wellbeing. This is a history of which our region is proud and want passed on to our younger generations so they can follow the same path.

Then in 1991 the Australian Government delivered a similar plan to ours; it described its plan as Reconciliation. And since that time it has added to this with its policy of Closing the Gap. The two of these being closely related.

Reconciliation was presented in 1991 in the following format.

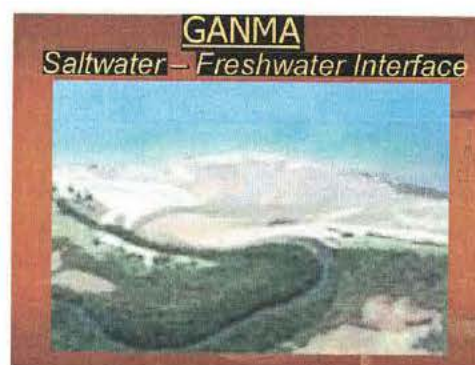




You can see the symbolic similarities between the above and our Two-Way Education Plan developed five years earlier. Therefore one could say, for a brief moment in time both Yangu and the Australian nation stood at least symbolically on common ground. However, it seems in the practical application of this symbol that things have gone wrong and both Reconciliation and Close the Gap remain elusive dreams for us all. And as it is currently constructed, this symbol remains one of Injury to us, tearing at our spirit.

Current Senator, Mr. Patrick Dodson, often referred to as the “Father of Reconciliation”, Chair of this committee and special envoy for Reconciliation and the implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, has adopted a First Nation Peoples’ concept for his understanding of what Reconciliation should look like.

“The river is the river and the sea is the sea. Salt water and fresh, two separate domains. Each has its own complex patterns, origins, stories. Even though they come together they will always exist in their own right. Our hope for Reconciliation is like that.” (Creative Spirits, n.d.).



This concept of Reconciliation aligns with the Yolngu philosophical conceptualisation of two-way learning as encapsulated in their symbolic metaphor of Ganma. Ganma being

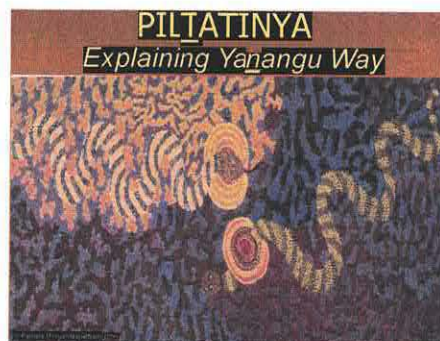
“The name of a lagoon where salt and fresh water meet. Water is a symbol of knowledge and Yolngu philosophy, and the metaphor of the meeting of two bodies of water is a way

of talking about the knowledge systems of two cultures working together.” (Marika, 1998, as cited in Living Knowledge, 2008, p. 2.)

However, while the same aspiration of two-way education is also articulated by Yanangu of Central Australia, the saltwater – freshwater metaphor does not work in our context. Therefore, we have looked to our intellectual and philosophical traditions to represent our understanding of these ideas of Reconciliation and Closing the Gap.

It is vitally important to understand that when we speak or act, we do so from our ways of knowing, doing and being. These being based upon, eons of ecological study of how the real world works and how we as humans / Yanangu must fit into this world. This I will try now to explain.

Piltati, is a site located to south-west of Walungurru, in Pintupi country. And the knowledge contained at this site is communicated in this text.



It is a text, which helps to consider and understand the intellectual and philosophical knowledge of Yanangu which our Two - Way model is based upon. A reading of the Piltati text provides an understanding of how Balance is achieved and how two ways works, from a Yanangu intellectual and philosophical viewpoint. It informs of what, for Yanangu, is required to achieve the balance necessary for us to begin repairing the damage done by the external hand which has so disastrously intervened in our lives. Moreover, it also provides an explanation as to how those national goals of Reconciliation and Close the Gap can be achieved from a Yanangu perspective

The Tjukurrpa of this site contains the knowledge as to how two seemingly different objects are interrelated and interdependent. And in working together in a balanced manner achieve mutual benefit for both.

The author of the text shown here was undertaken by my younger mother. However, the original text, which we do not have an image of, was produced by my young mother's older brother, my uncle. At the time he provided the following information.

*We see two snakes travelling who are searching for each other.*

*One is a female snake and non-venomous. She travels during the day – the lighter shaded area.*



*The other snake is a male and venomous, he travels at night – the darker shaded area.*

*These two snakes are searching for each other.*

*And this site is a sacred site.*

This reading of Piltati itself appears simple enough but the knowledge it contains is profound. The understanding I will present in this submission is only the surface knowledge related to this site. It does not represent or convey the full extent of Yanangu knowledge related to this text.

Elements that this text contains are day and night.

When are those moments in time when they catch sight of each other?

Sunrise – sunset – those merged moments of beauty we all enjoy

- For Yanangu they are also instructive metaphorical moments of new light, life, thinking and doing.

Male and female – we are all products of and composites of both

In Central Australia we have two laws Female law and Male law.

While they are separate, they also come together in moments critical in the development and growth of Yanangu.

Think also what this text might be saying about contemporary issues such as gender equity and multiculturalism.

So, what this text demonstrates is an understanding, produced by thousands of years of study and observation, of how the real-world works. It is the Law of this Land.

That all elements are interrelated to and interdependent on the other.

It is also knowledge that realises that knowing oneself is through that of the other.

One cannot know day except by the dark and vice versa.

One does not know salt water except through the taste of fresh water.

In this manner difference is not regarded as a threat or something to be eliminated or altered to fit a particular view of the world.

Differences are not oppositional but complementary seen as components of a greater whole.

It respects and values all entities as components of that whole.

Such knowledge is not knowledge which encourages conquest, hegemony, domination or colonisation but one which conveys empathy and advocates for balance through cooperation, negotiation and compromise.

Yanangu knowledge provides a space for creativity, beauty, new life and knowledge to emerge when and where elements join in a balanced manner.

Such a space is not only a product of each element but also a space where benefit accrues to each other.

However, to achieve those combined moments where new light, life and ways of knowing and doing can be formed, the integrity of both sides needs to be assured.

This is a critical requirement.

Meaning, to ensure our integrity as people, then those things which belong to and compose us as Yanangu and which we hold the knowledge of, should be in our safe hands.

In this manner a productive and healthy balance can be achieved between the two hands.

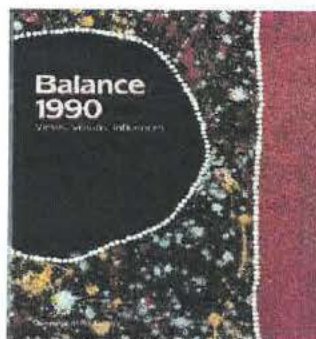
This is a balance achieved through equitable negotiation and compromise, as in the ebb and flow of life.

Currently we know it is the integrity of Yanangu well-being which is compromised as it remains under constant stress with all the strength and power invested in one side of the equation.

So, with this knowledge in mind, we are concentrating on restoring the integrity of our self, knowing that in doing so a corrective, balanced, productive and mutually beneficial relationship can be achieved.

Restoration of our integrity has been the constant and continuing project of Yanangu and other First Nation People since the first colonial intervention in our lives and livelihood.

This work produced by my younger mother was featured in a 1990 Queensland Art Gallery exhibition titled Balance.



Therefore, what we now understand, is that to relieve the stress upon our kurrumpa and begin the healing process, requires a re-structuring of the relationship between these two hands. And to be effective, it needs to be undertaken from a Yanangu perspective. Now I will try to explain how we consider this restructuring should proceed to achieve that healthy balance.



Moreover, in this re-structuring and re-balanced relationship, I think we can see what the foundations of such current concerns as Voice, Truth Telling and Treaty might mean from an Yaṇangu perspective.

- First, we have a Yaṇangu aspiration.
- Then we have the national aspiration.

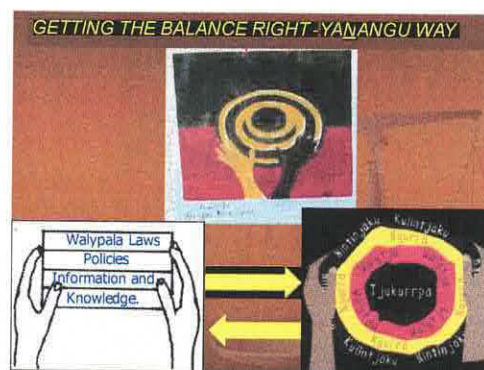
However as currently constructed this is tearing Yaṇangu spirit apart.

So, with similar aspirations we have a collective responsibility in getting the balance right.

To repair our spirit, we have essentially deconstructed the faulty and injurious current construct of Reconciliation into its component parts, much like you would a faulty motor car engine.

And having repaired the faulty part put them back together in manner which will make this model function as it should.

Yaṇangu know what is needed to repair the fault and put its component part back together in a way that will work not only for us but achieve those national aspirations at the same time. That is benefit for us all.



- On the LHS we have features of Colonial Australia.
- On the RHS that construct of Yaṇangu well-being.

For Yaṇangu our side does not represent some essentialist desire or reverse apartheid.

It is not a separation.

For Yaṇangu it is a coming together mechanism for the benefit of both. Critically it is about restoring the integrity of self.

- What it enables is the opportunity for us to regulate and moderate, those influences from the LHS, which have been so injurious to Yaṇangu for so long, through a Yaṇangu decision making process while providing a voice to articulate our solutions. Such as modelled in the last chapter of the NATSIEP text.

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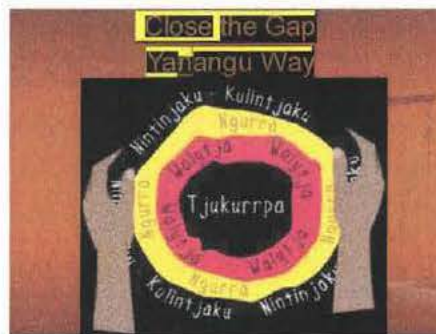
- More importantly such a structure enables us to be pro-active and present to the LHS policies and strategies which will support our well-being and restoration of spirit.

Thus achieving a balanced Two-Way flow of knowledge, if the LHS responds appropriately.

So in this two-way process it is incumbent upon the left-hand side to ease off, to know the truth of its impact and so accept and support the decisions of Yanangu to achieve the balance which restores Yanangu wellbeing as we know it to be.

This is the challenge now set for this Nation.

Will it prove to be generous and brave enough to enable that Gap to diminish, and the integrity of Yangu and other First Nation Peoples' well being restored. To ensure the safety of our community with a stronger future and support us Close the Gap our way.



Yours Sincerely

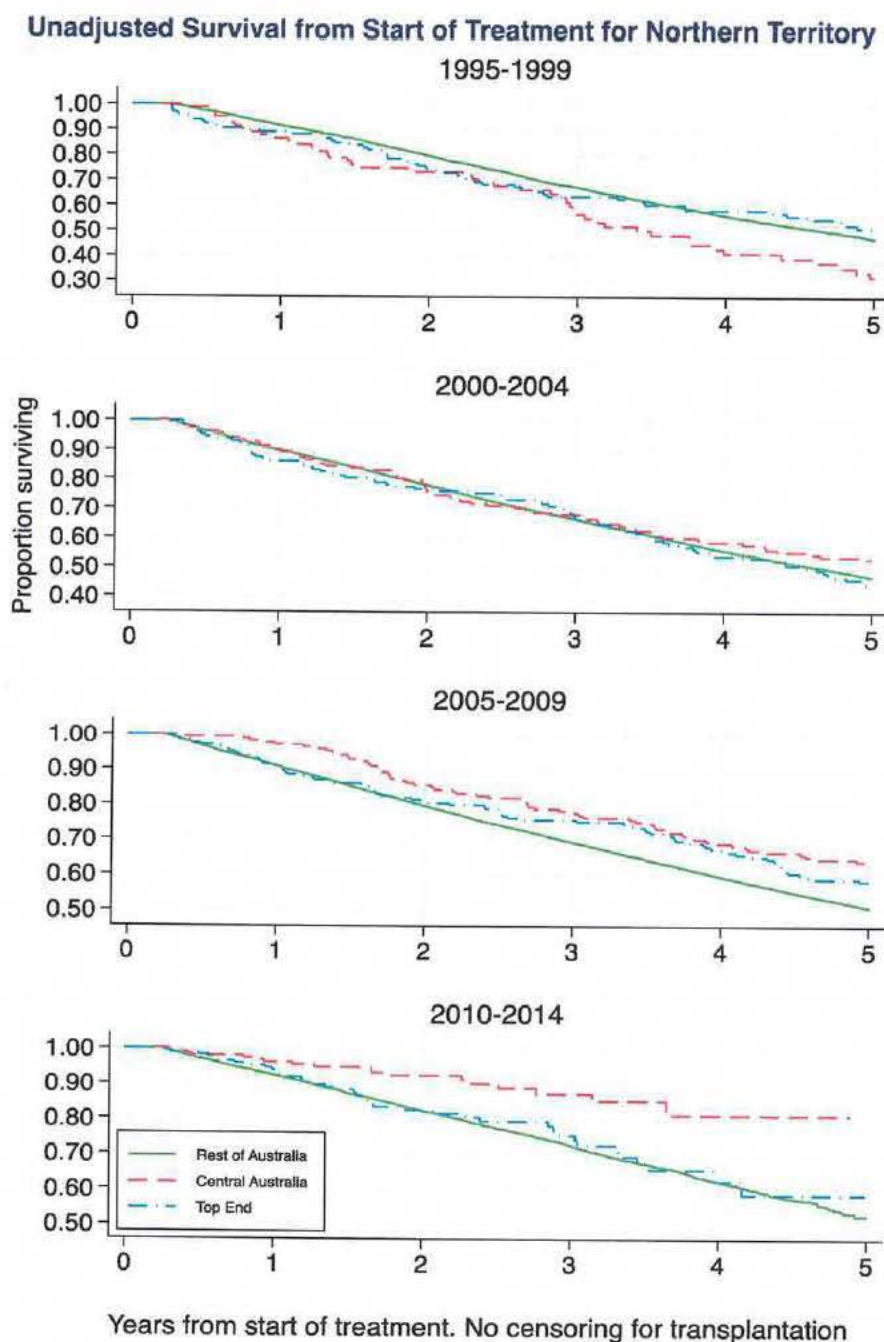
*Monica Nangala Robinson*

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## APPENDIX A.

Unadjusted (Kaplan-Meier) survival, showing significant differences for Central Australia compared to either Top End or rest of Australia for all time periods except 2000-2004 (Lawton, personal communication, February 15, 2019).



What this data demonstrates is an extraordinary turn-around in Central Australia, in survival rates for sufferers of ESRD from their initial dialysis. With Central Australia moving from basket case to leading the nation in reducing the rate and levels of morbidity for renal

patients. An art auction in 2000, provided Yanangu the resources to pursue a remedy, Yanangu Way, to the epidemic of End Stage Renal Disease (ESRD) with which we remain afflicted. In so doing we have demonstrated that not only can we Close the Gap on the national average but that we also have the capacity to open an inverse gap upon the rest of the nation.