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Inquiry into community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

This submission will focus on the impacts of the Fregon store on the health and well being of the community in Fregon.

I submit the submission below to the Inquiry as an individual, a customer of the Fregon store, a health professional in the community and as a community member.

Community stores are essential to the health and well being of remote communities a good community store can have a huge impact on both morbidity and general well being. Often it is the case that due to financial constraints, lack of transport, remoteness from urban centres and the general lack of financial management that indigenous people living in remote communities plan their dietary intake meal to meal and the only option to purchase this meal comes from the community store. As has been well documented, the general housing conditions of indigenous people in remote communities is poor and often all the essentials to both prepare a well balanced meal and then cook the meal are lacking. In my experience the fridge generally no longer works, the stove may work in a few kitchens throughout these communities but it is the exception rather than the rule and the general cleanliness of the kitchens is also of concern. These things, along with many other barriers demonstrate the need for the community stores to offer good food of reasonable quality at affordable prices as in most cases this the only option available to the residents of these communities.

I am a remote area nurse and have been employed for 18 months on the APY Lands and have witnessed first hand the impact on Indigenous people when the community store fails to meet the basic needs of all the residents of the community.

I have witnessed many practices which are not only illegal in mainstream stores but also practices which have undoubtedly had a direct impact on peoples health. Despite programs such as Mai Waru being implemented cigarettes remain the biggest seller in many stores and soft drinks are a close second. Community stores continue to offer a minimal variety of foods and fresh fruit and vegetables are often spoilt by the time they reach the shelves and the high prices placed on them by the store managers generally result in people opting for the cheaper, quicker option of things such as meat pies and other items of little nutritional value. Often goods are well past the expiry date and turned around so the dates are not visible, items which should be sold as packs are separated and sold individually for exorbitant prices and non perishable items such as cleaning items are priced out of even the reach of non-Indigenous people working in these communities. Foods such as previously cooked chickens which

are not sold in the supermarkets in the city are transported out to these communities and the price is almost doubled in some cases. In addition, it is sold in the community store and consumed after being reheated yet again and this often results in people suffering symptoms of nausea and vomiting as the chicken is obviously not suitable for consumption. Why is it that these practices are accepted in these remote communities and barely anyone even notices? The rates of diabetes, heart disease, obesity, tooth decay and all the other lifestyle diseases continue to rise for Indigenous people and something as simple as providing good food options is overlooked or perhaps just poorly implemented.

As a health professional working in a remote community, I find it extremely frustrating that we provide education on good food choices and are constantly trying to empower people to make good choices related to their dietary intake. However, when the residents of these communities attempt to purchase healthy foods they are more often than not faced with the reality of the foods just not being available for purchase or the quality being well below the standard experienced for consumers in urban centres. If the food is available the price is often marked up to a point which makes it unattainable. Many times I have experienced women in the community store trying to make good choices but due to lack of choice, unavailability of goods, financial restraint and a general level of misunderstanding regarding the labeling of products, the language barrier, generally poor literacy levels and a general lack of understanding regarding marketing practices these women often end up with goods which are sub standard and of little or no nutritional value.

A huge concern in the APY in particular, is the high rates of tooth decay, the majority of children have extensive tooth decay which is well established by the time they commence school. I have been involved with children as young as 5 who have been sent to Alice Springs to undergo the removal of up to 5 teeth as the decay is so extensive. To see a child here with healthy teeth is very rare and the average child would have at least 3-4 major untreated cavities and extensive dental issues. There is little doubt that this issue is a direct result from the high sugar content of the diet consumed by these children as it is not unusual to see children eating ice creams and consuming a can of soft drink for breakfast. The impact on their health and well being is evident not only in their general health status as issues such as anemia and failure to thrive remain consistent but are also reflected in poor concentration levels at school and behavioural issues which have also been linked to poor dietary intake and developmental delay. Failure to thrive infants remain common throughout most communities, the consequences of this have been well documented but strategies to address the issue are failing and children are continuing to suffer. As a result these children face a life sentence of growth retardation resulting in the physical and psychological consequences of malnutrition which in turn places them at significant risk for long term physical and psychodevelopmental sequela. Obviously community stores are not solely responsible for this but reforming their practices appear to me to be a logical and cost effective place to start dealing with the real issues faced by the residents of these communities.

Another issue of concern which I have identified is the use of the profits of these stores. The theory is that the profits are to be redirected back into the community following consultation with the store committee and the community. The community in which I am a resident last year purchased a mini bus which cost around \$30k. This mini bus was never maintained and within two months had become non-operational. Over Christmas the store 'donated' a plasma tv and DVD to every household in the community as a present with the profits for the second half of the year. This amounted to approx 25 televisions and DVD players being distributed while many residents of the community, especially children were without enough food. Where is the sense in this? The money should surely have been invested in ensuring the standard of the store was improved and providing the essentials required for day to day to living, such as good quality food.

My final point of concern is store operating hours. As mentioned previously, the store is often the only available source of food and it is not uncommon for indigenous people to live meal to meal. The store in the community which I am most familiar with is closed on all public holidays and Sundays, this often leads to residents going without food until the store reopens and often at this time arguments and disputes arise between community members as people are obviously distressed and hungry. The issue of the ATMs in the stores is also of concern as it is my understanding that every transaction, even if it is just to obtain a balance costs the card holder a fee of \$5. Some residents of these communities may check balances

numerous times throughout the day while waiting for their centrelink payments and their available funds are diminished with every transaction. There is really no other option to do this as not a single Indigenous household in this community has a computer in order to carry out internet banking. Phone banking is also problematic as working and/or accessible phones are also rare. Consideration needs to be given to this issue but I feel it is beyond my scope to address this issue in depth within this submission.

These issues are not new and new policies and new reports are always surfacing but little is changing and the health outcomes are certainly are not improving at an acceptable rate. As a resident of a remote community and also a health professional I believe it is crucial that things begin to change and we begin providing the Indigenous people of Australia with stores which are at least meeting their most basic needs and at best actually assisting in 'Closing the Gap', rather than stores which are in some cases actually contributing to their high burden of disease.

Recommendations

- To provide clothes/furniture/household goods for sale in all community stores at a reasonable price and of reasonable quality.
- Provide education in communities which educates residents in areas of budgeting, internet banking.
- Provide adequate banking facilities and access to internet banking/phone banking which is actually accesable.
- Subsidise food of high nutritional value and increase the cost of unhealthy choices.
- Ban the sale of soft drinks/ or limit the sale of soft drink especially to children.
- Enforce the ilegal sale of tobacco products to children.
- Ensure standard goods and foods available in all stores and cap the cost of these products.
- Train community members to work in the store.
- Provide regular education regarding good food choices.
- Give families the option of portioning their income and assisting them with budgeting.
- Regular/ random audits of all community stores and the services which they provide eg food choices, freshness, quality.
- Real consultation with the community in regards to how to spend the profits and transparent book keeping.
- Input from all community members in regards to what they would like in their store.
- Instead of selling high fat foods from the takeaway only provide healthy options which are affordable.