

# **Closing the Gap between Policy and Practice: Employing Indigenous women in the Northern Territory**

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## **Background**

Ironbark Employment is an Indigenous specialist member of Job Futures Australia. It is also a Program/Business Name of Darwin Regional Indigenous Advancement & CDEP Incorporated (DRIACDEP). We assist clients in the Darwin region, secure long term and sustainable employment.

Darwin Regional Indigenous Advancement & CDEP holds a contract to provide both Job Services Australia (JSA) and Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP). This puts us in a unique position to provide employment opportunities for our clients in both urban and remote areas such as Acacia, Belyuen, Batchelor (CDEP & JSA) and Bagot, Knuckey's Lagoon and Palmerston Indigenous Village. (JSA Only)

This paper provides a brief overview of the JSA & CDE Programs which Darwin Regional Indigenous Advancement & CDEP Incorporated provides and then highlights the many internal and external barriers which Indigenous women face when choosing to seek mainstream employment rather than CDEP.

Suggestions for action are offered to executive staff within mainstream organisations that are committed to closing the gap between policy and practice: between rhetoric and results.

Unlike traditional, (objective and theoretical) academic papers I have deliberately adopted a subjective, narrative approach, inviting you, the reader to begin to learn something of the lives and experiences of Indigenous women as anxious job seekers. For in knowing them and relating to them, you may find the determination to *walk with them* as they struggle to overcome the barriers to mainstream employment which also deny them access to the many benefits employment can bring to their lives and the lives of their families and communities.

### **A brief overview of our Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP)**

Many Indigenous people, for a variety of reasons, prefer to remain within their communities and engage in CDEP rather than attempt to enter mainstream employment.

Darwin Regional Indigenous Advancement & CDEP Incorporated works in conjunction and collaboration with the Indigenous Community Government Councils, or Traditional Owners, or key spokespeople, to develop relevant and requested CDEP in these communities, as well as capacity building projects that may lead to employment opportunities.

At 30 June, 2010 ninety six Indigenous people were engaged in CDE Programs. Of these thirty nine were women.

Projects have included:

- Community vegetable gardens- gaining certificates in Horticulture
- Creation and sale of art works – recently held public exhibitions and sale through Bush Traders Inc.
- Production and sale of soaps and traditional cosmetics
- Production and sale of bush tucker
- On site media studios have been constructed and computer and multimedia training is available
- Re-furbishing of homes; community shops and playground equipment

Many of our clients complete CDEP and through this experience gain the confidence and skills to then work closely with our Ironbark Employment unit to gain mainstream employment or continue their studies. In Darwin we are uniquely placed to be able to provide this uninterrupted support for our clients to continue their lifelong educational and employment journey.

The remainder of this paper addresses the barriers which many of our Indigenous clients face when deciding to leave the security and support of their community, CDEP and to enter into mainstream employment.

### **Ironbark Employment Services**

Ironbark Employment an Indigenous specialist employment organisation, commenced in the Darwin area in July 2009. We assist our clients to secure long term sustainable employment and provide a range of free services to support their success.

Approximately 90% of our clients are Indigenous and are of all ages.

#### ***Ages of Indigenous women***

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) projects that by the end of June 2011 almost half (45%) of Indigenous females will be aged less than 20 years, compared with 25% of the total female population [2]; [5]. Burns et al (2010:2)

There are numerous Federal Government and Northern Territory Government initiatives to encourage and support employment of young Indigenous men and women and we actively engage all young clients in these opportunities. These initiatives provide an important bridge from unemployment to work or study and are vital however there are fewer such initiatives for more mature Indigenous clients.

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Many of these older people are rich in life experience and knowledge, yet have had few diverse mainstream employment opportunities. For these clients entering mainstream employment poses many challenges and barriers.

### **Barrier 1: Internal barriers, including self-belief**

Many of our Indigenous clients have had limited work experience in mainstream employment. Typically, they have worked in hospitality, cleaning or labouring having had little encouragement or support to seek work outside of these areas.

A significant component of the work we do at Ironbark Employment is to identify strengths, build self-esteem, and encourage participant confidence to imagine themselves in roles they are unfamiliar with yet well qualified to undertake.

Resilience is a quality frequently identified in the literature as characteristic of Indigenous Australians. Our clients demonstrate this daily as they face and overcome numerous obstacles and barriers to securing mainstream employment.

Some common challenges our Indigenous female clients face are:

- **Self esteem and confidence**

Numerous studies have shown major differences between Indigenous and non Indigenous student's life aspirations and self identity/esteem. "Whilst all students had similar life goals Indigenous students were: more likely to identify lower levels of educational and training aspirations (and) identify more barriers to achieving their aspirations" [27] Parente (2003:2). It takes courage for any of us to move into new areas and undertake unfamiliar employment and training experiences. This is particularly so for many of our Indigenous female clients.

- **Clothing**

Insufficient money to purchase 'suitable clothing' to wear during training programs and interviews, or, when such clothes are obtained, they are not available when needed, a family member having borrowed them.

- **Transport**

Most Ironbark clients rely on public transport. Private vehicles are usually not affordable to individuals and the community or family car is often not available for one member's daily transport to work. Some women need to walk kilometres to an infrequent feeder-service or main route for transport, often over wet boggy or dusty ground with little protection from the frequent downpours of rain during the wet season.

- **Childcare**

Within Indigenous communities, it is common for women to have primary childcare responsibilities not only for their own children but also for those of their extended families. A client who recently completed a pre recruitment training program with us needed to 'organise' seven children and several grandchildren before attending the program each day.

- **Accommodation, Sleep, and Study**

Many Indigenous people, including many of our clients, live in overcrowded accommodation with up to twenty others sharing a small home. It is often difficult to get a restful night's sleep, to be fresh for work or study in the morning, when many others, without those commitments, enjoy all night social activities at the house. Several of our clients are homeless (Long Grass) forced to this living circumstance for a variety of reasons. One Indigenous female client in her 40's who has recently secured full time employment had been living in a tent in the bush due to outstanding rental debts to Northern Territory Housing. These debts were incurred by her and her ex- partner who had later absconded all financial responsibility. She was paying fortnightly instalments to NT Housing which were deducted from her Centrelink income. Now with secure employment she can clear her debts and once again afford rental accommodation.

*“The Larrakia Nation estimates that there are more than 2000 individuals on any one night in the greater Darwin area living in Darwin's Long Grass, of which 75% identify as being Indigenous Australians”.* [16] L.N.A.C (2010)

- **Peer and family pressure**

Within some Indigenous families and communities, engagement in mainstream employment or training is not common. There is often little support or encouragement for women who try to pursue either

- **Financial pressure**

While an unemployed woman suffers economic disadvantage, some women have declared *humbugging* to be such a problem when they did gain employment that they would rather not work at all. (*Humbugging* occurs when one person with money is continually asked by others for a share, either as a gift or a 'loan'.)

- **Parenting**

Many of our clients are single mothers. They have fled violent relationships or unsustainable living arrangements to provide a safer and better future for their children. In leaving, some have also lost the support of their community and those extended family members who may have otherwise been available to assist with child care, financial or emotional support.

### **Darwin Regional Indigenous Advancement & CDEP Incorporated services**

Understanding that there are many potential barriers to mainstream employment we have successfully gained funding to provide our clients with a comprehensive range of free services which include:

1. **Community Service Support** – Our clients have full access to our staff who assist them access services including housing, legal aid, health care, rehabilitation, food and clothing support. These staff members are also engaged

in community development activities and providing community education along with many other vital services for our clients.

2. **Money Management Team** – Our clients have full access to free money management services including assistance with managing budgets, negotiating for changes to loan repayments, taxation issues and so on.

Staff within these services work closely with Ironbark Employment staff to ensure a one stop service delivery model. In this way our clients are not repeating their ‘private circumstances’ to a number of agencies or providers and a much better coordinated and effective service can be provided.

### **Some facts about Indigenous people and finances**

- Indigenous people suffer substantial disadvantage in: education, employment, income, housing, access to services, social networks, connection with land, racism, and incarceration. Burns et al. (2010:2)
- Workforce participation can significantly influence a woman's level of income... the dominant experience of Indigenous women is that of relative economic hardship, given their generally reduced participation in the mainstream workforce. Burns et al. (2010:3)
- Figures from the 2006 Australian census highlight the extent of the financial adversity encountered by Indigenous people [3] The mean equivalised gross income per week for Indigenous households in 2006 was \$521, compared with \$730 for non-Indigenous households [23]. Burns et al. (2010:3)
- The median gross weekly individual income for Indigenous females aged 15 years or older in 2006 was \$278, compared with \$367 for non-Indigenous females. This discrepancy was greatest in the NT. [23]. Burns et al. (2010:3)

### **Suggestions for employers on closing the gap between policy and practice:**

- Acknowledge the intensive support and encouragement possibly required to assist some Indigenous jobseekers to prepare and submit an application for employment
- Where possible, work closely with an Indigenous specialist employment agency – or an agency with expertise in working with Indigenous clients which is willing to assist clients in the application process
- Ensure position vacancies are advertised in a way which is truly accessible to Indigenous jobseekers. Advertisements should be worded in very plain English. Illustrations should demonstrate diversity (of race, age, and gender) in the workplace
- Ensure that those without access to computers or to the internet are not disadvantaged and that all information about the position is available to them by snail mail, or collection not just electronically
- Remember that word-of-mouth is often the most effective way to engage Indigenous jobseekers.

Individuals and organisations in wide and frequent contact with Indigenous people should be kept up to date of employment opportunities so that they can spread the word about what's available.

## **Barrier 2: the Resume**

Many Ironbark clients have no resume when they register with us for assistance in gaining employment. Some have a resume previously created for them by another agency. Typically, such a resume includes a list of spasmodic, paid work in cleaning, housekeeping, or hospitality. Sometimes the chronological list is interspersed with a line saying 'homemaker' or 'carer'. Rarely do these resumes reflect the true skills, strengths or experience of the person.

One of the first conversations we have with clients is about re-writing their resume. Rather than focussing on their history of paid work, we ask about how they spend their time most days. Formally, this would be described as adopting a narrative approach to career development. Informally it's: "Tell me your story. I'd really like to know." To adopt this approach demands time, relationship and respect. Even with these elements present, the client's 'story telling' may be guarded and therefore stilted.

But why *should* they trust me or anyone else in the recruitment world? Indeed, how many of us have asked to hear their story? And if so, how many listened in a non-judgemental let alone an encouraging way? Ask yourself: am I able to hear that this person has been in jail, or rehabilitation, or 'Long Grass', or a women's shelter without being overwhelmed by the possible barriers to her employment? Can I help her re-write her history in an empowering way by co-creating with her a resume that reflects her strengths, skills, and resilience?

At Ironbark we regularly offer pre-employment training programs. Re-writing the resume is a significant event for most applicants who attend.

All existing resumes are printed and distributed within the group. Some participants have never seen their resume. It is a mysterious document on an employment agency computer to which they have little if any access, a document for which they had no sense of ownership.

We ask the group whether anyone had a resume stating that they were Indigenous, listing the several languages they speak, where their country is, who they are connected to, how many children they have, what they do in their communities or families, who they help and how they help, what cultural responsibilities they have, what they have done that they are proud of, what they are good at (skills), what problems they have had to deal with (strengths) and so on.

Usually no-one has a resume that reflects these holistic and important elements of their lives.

As a group we begin to discuss each of these aspects and they are recorded on butcher's paper. As each person is encouraged to use their own community language and to prompt and assist others, the stories begin to unfold and the richness of their lives is revealed. This process of storytelling, connecting and recording, can take two full days, depending on the size of the group. It is a process of trust and of overcoming the cultural resistance to speaking about oneself in this open way.

Many of our Indigenous clients hold a collective rather than individual worldview. For many, it is still considered 'a shame job' to boast, to declare individual achievements or merits.

We then sit with each applicant one-on-one to review the information recorded and to determine what to include on the resume and what to exclude as personal business. Resumes are transformed from half-page documents stating name, address and scant lines of work history, to vibrantly holistic documents illustrating remarkable bundles of transferable, valuable skills.

### **Some facts about Indigenous people and employment**

*Australian Bureau of Statistics figures released in June 2010 indicate the unemployment rate increased from 14 to 18 per cent over the 12 months between 2008 and 2009... Some 35,400 Indigenous people were out of work last year – up from 27,100 in 2008... At the time, the employment rate for those aged 15 to 64 fell from 50 to 48 per cent... The gap in unemployment rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians increased from 9.6 to 12.6 percentage points in the two year to 2009. The employment gap jumped from 23 to 24.4 percentage points. Drape (2010:1).*

### **Suggestions for employers in closing the gap between policy and practice:**

Ask yourselves as recruiters or employers:

- Am I willing to employ an Indigenous woman without a resume?
- Is a resume the most useful way to determine suitability? Or is it simply more convenient and conventional?
- Would I consider a verbal resume or a verbal recommendation?
- Am I willing to act on the knowledge that many Indigenous women will not include in their resume many of the skills, experiences, strengths and talents she can bring to the role and employ her anyway?
- Will I accept a portfolio resume? Will I ask applicants to bring along examples of their work instead of a written document?
- Could I offer a few days paid-work trial to determine a jobseeker's suitability, rather than rely on a resume?

- Would I consider adopting the approach used by the Northern Territory Government Indigenous recruitment team? In this model group information sessions for all Indigenous people keen to work within the Northern Territory Government are held. All potential applicants are welcome and are invited to bring their resume with them to the forum. Informal one-on-one discussions are held at the close of the group process and the resume simply becomes one of many ways the recruiters *begin to know* the applicant.
- Will I work with an Indigenous-specialist employment agency with the time and expertise to assist in resume writing?

### **Barrier 3: Completing selection criteria**

Ironbark Employment offers all clients assistance in addressing selection criteria for positions when required. Few feel confident to address criteria without our assistance.

For many Indigenous clients, English is a second (or third, fourth or more) language. The unnecessarily complex language used in many selection criteria poses a barrier for many. When assisting clients address criteria our approach is to firstly extract the key words or phrases from the selection criteria statements. “What are they looking for in this one?” we’d ask. Once key terms (e.g.: ‘team work’, ‘personal accomplishment’, ‘understanding of Indigenous issues’) are identified, we write these down and begin a process of brainstorming what could be written to address that criterion. If at all possible we invite candidates to work together to help each other in their own language and to remind each other of accomplishments or be reminded of their own experiences by what others have said. In the spirit of brainstorming, everything is listed and our purposeful inclusion of humour assists applicants to feel less ‘shame’ about speaking about themselves in this way.

Once we have a number of points which can be included in the application we begin the process of working one-on-one to personalise their document. We draw from what has already been revealed in the brainstorming and from the updating of resumes. Together, we create a statement addressing the selection criteria to the applicant’s satisfaction and this process can take several hours depending on the number of selection criteria to be addressed and the length of responses to each question

#### **Some facts about Indigenous people and education**

- In 2006, school completion to year 12, was much lower for Indigenous females than for their non-Indigenous counterparts. NT and ACT had the lowest retention to Year 12 rates. Burns et al. (2010:2)
- According to the 2006 Australian Census of Population and Housing, one-fifth (20%) of Indigenous females aged over 15 years had a post-school qualification compared with 37% of non-Indigenous females [3]. Burns et al. (2010:2)
- 60% of Aboriginal children are significantly behind non-Aboriginal children by the time they start Year One, Koori Mail (390:47)

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- 21% of Indigenous people aged 15-64 had completed year 12 in 2008. Same figure in 2002: 18%; figure for non-Indigenous people in 2008: 54% 'Gains, but the gap is still wide, study finds', Koori Mail (463:9)
- The lack of post-school qualifications impacts particularly on the employment of Indigenous females: 16% of Indigenous females without any post-school qualifications were unemployed in 2006, compared with 5% of non-Indigenous females. [23] Burns et al. (2010:3)

#### **Suggestions for employers in closing the gap between policy and practice:**

- Consider if a selection criteria is really required for this position. Are we simply following policy which in practice may not suit many applicants?
- If selection criteria are required, how can these be worded in clear and simple English?
- Can we note on the selection criteria that applicants are encouraged to seek assistance in completing this section of the application and provide contact details for assistance?
- Can the applicant address the selection criteria verbally, rather than in writing? Telephone interviews are reasonably common practice, perhaps a similar process could be adopted for selection criteria.
- If the applicant does not have access to the internet at home (and many do not), how else could an Application Pack be easily obtained?
- Will we work with an Indigenous specialist employment agency with the time and expertise to assist with addressing selection criteria?

#### **Barrier 4: Interviews**

One of the most highly regarded qualities within a workplace is the ability to work effectively as part of a team. Many of us have used the phrase “there is no ‘I’ in team”, yet it seems that in many workplaces there is still a strong expectation of an ‘I’ perspective to be evident in response to the selection criteria and during interviews.

As already discussed, many Indigenous women live in a collaborative community and one with a collectivist perspective. Successes are often group or community successes with no one woman wanting to put herself above the others when speaking of accomplishments.

During pre-employment training programs offered at Ironbark Employment, we discuss the common expectation by mainstream employers for candidates to use eye contact and ‘I’ language. It may be culturally disrespectful for some Indigenous men and women to make eye contact, so we advise the members of our training group to focus on the bridge of an interviewer’s nose rather looking directly into the interviewer’s eyes. Overcoming the ‘shame’ associated with using ‘I’ language often proves more difficult for some.

Other factors which can adversely affect Indigenous applicants' performance in interviews are: lack of confidence and little to no prior experience in formal interview processes.

We discuss these factors and arrange for mock interviews with management staff from the National Australia Bank (NAB). This provides NAB staff with important interviewer-skills practice and our candidates with a formal interview experience with people they do not know. NAB staff provide written feedback to our candidates and few escape the comment "speak more confidently about yourself and your achievements!"

Whenever clients are successful in gaining an interview for employment there is both a spike in anxiety levels as well as growing excitement at the possibility of more disposable income. Many begin talking about the new bicycle they have promised their child, or the healthier diet of fresh fruit and vegetables that can be provided on a proper income. Women particularly become excited about being better able to support their children and extended family. Some slowly begin to speak to friends and family about the possibility of working. Heads are held high and people laugh, nurturing hope and dreams for the future.

We have known clients to withdraw applications before interview. Some have been on the waiting list for Government housing for many years and become concerned they will lose their place on the list if they are successful in gaining employment. Others face increasing pressure from family members, undermining their confidence or dissuading them from their decision to proceed to interview.

Many of us find a formal, three person panel, interview process intimidating. Not surprisingly so do our nervous Indigenous clients who report feeling extremely uncomfortable. We have often been told the interview was like a test or that they 'just froze.' It is common in formal interview processes within larger organisations to have someone in the room transcribing notes. We have had clients say "It was like being in a court room with that woman on the computer." Clearly these environments do not bring out the best, most relaxed response from any woman Indigenous or not.

Informal interviews or group discussion and problem solving activities appear to be a much more effective way to conduct interviews with Indigenous candidates. Indeed, an employer who regularly works with Ironbark to recruit employees holds mutually satisfactory interviews sitting with jobseekers under the shade of a tree and drinking tea!

Like all of us, when our Indigenous clients fail to gain employment after an interview they are devastated. There will be no extra money for school books, healthy food, better accommodation, health care, dental care and the myriad of other social, psychological and economic benefits which come from being employed.

Tragically, those who are not successful seem to move from devastation to complacency unnervingly quickly. This is obviously just another example of being encouraged to dream of a brighter future only to be thrown back into the darkness of poverty, violence and the raft of other social conditions confronting Indigenous women each day.

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### **Some facts about Indigenous people: policy and practice documents**

- Many employers have moved away from formal panel interview techniques.
- Extensive literature and resources are easily available, proposing better models for interviews and culturally appropriate interview techniques. One example is the Northern Territory Government's *Northern Territory Public Sector Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategy 2010-2012* [24] which is one of many valuable guides for assisting employers to recruit more Indigenous employees.

### **Suggestions for employers on closing the gap between policy and practice:**

- Acknowledge that many Indigenous people live in homes far less comfortable than mainstream workplaces. For people with limited interview experience, the entire 'formal' interview process can be daunting, overwhelming, and confronting - particularly when held in the unfamiliar executive office environment
- Explore other processes which could be used for interviewing prospective employees and determining suitability for the position
- Invite an Indigenous woman onto your selection panel
- Consider implementing group interview or more in-formal interview practices rather than panels.

### **Barrier 5: Police clearances**

Many mainstream employment positions require applicants to agree to a police check being conducted if successful in passing the interview stage and prior to employment. When a police criminal check is completed the *circumstances* of the crime are not described. At Ironbark Employment we have seen many Indigenous clients who are outstanding candidates for positions and who have passed the interview stage be discarded, based on a criminal history check.

One example is a women selected (based on her excellent skills and abilities) for a short-term contract position who had served a four month jail sentence in 2007 for assault who was not employed because of a 'recruitment policy' which prohibited employment of people with a background of assault.

In this woman's case she had assaulted a drunken man who had 'interfered' with her teenage daughter.

Another example is a woman who had overcome many obstacles to almost complete a Certificate course in child care. This was her proudest accomplishment to date. Prior to undertaking the work placement, an essential component of her course was that a police

check was obtained. She was devastated to find that a drink drive offence some years previously had caused a police check stating restricted approval to work in child care. Her circumstance? She does not consume alcohol yet on Christmas Day, several years ago she had two glasses of wine with lunch and afterwards borrowed a car to drive to the local shop for cream needed for the evening meal. She was breath-tested and had a reading of 0.06. She does not have any other offences against her and yet this one may well prohibit her from working in the area she loves and has worked hard to gain qualifications in.

Clearly the mistakes of the past are not in the past when it comes to employment policy and practice. Punishment for a crime can continue well beyond the period of sentence.

### **Some facts about Indigenous people and the law**

- 83% of the prison population in the NT is Indigenous. Aboriginal people constitute less than 30% of the total population of the NT. ABS figures show in the first half of 2008, there were 8,411 Indigenous people enrolled in tertiary education. At the same time there were 6,605 Indigenous people in prison ... nowhere else in the world would you see figures where the Indigenous population in jail almost matches the Indigenous population at University... The jailing rate of black males in South Africa at the end of the Apartheid era (1993) was 851 per 100,000 population. In Australia today we jail black males at a national rate of 4,364 per 100,000. That's over five times higher.... In the Northern Territory the rate is almost six times higher." Graham (2009)
- In the two-year period July 2004 to June 2006, for Indigenous females living in NSW, Vic, Qld, WA, SA and the NT, assault was responsible for 32% of Indigenous female admissions for injury to hospital [10]. The numbers of admissions for Indigenous females for assault were 35 times higher than non-Indigenous rates. Burns et al (2010:7)
- Over the period 2001-2005, Indigenous females died as a result of assault at rates between 6 and 23 times the equivalent age-specific rates for non-Indigenous females, accounting for 16% of all deaths due to external causes [8]. Burns et al (2010:7)
- In 2009, the overall rate of imprisonment for Indigenous females was 360 per 100,000 population compared with 18 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous females ... The proportion of the prison population that was Indigenous varied greatly from over 80% in the NT to under 10% in Vic [6]. Burns et al (2010:18)
- Indigenous females represent one of the fastest growing sub-sections of the adult prison population, a fact of concern when considering Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system and the socio-cultural effects of female imprisonment on families and communities [21]. Burns et al (2010:18)
- The type of offences that Indigenous and non-Indigenous females are imprisoned for differs significantly. In 2009 Indigenous females were primarily imprisoned for 'Acts intended to cause injury' (31%) and 'Offences against justice procedures, government security and operations' (14%) while non-Indigenous females were imprisoned for

'Illicit drug offences' (22%) and 'Fraud, deception and related offences'(15%) [6].  
Burns et al (2010:19)

- The number of Indigenous juveniles in detention in Australia increased by 65% between 2001 and 30 June 2007, while non-Indigenous juveniles in detention increased by only 1.3% in the same period. In 2007 Indigenous female juveniles were imprisoned at a rate of 24 times that of non-Indigenous female juveniles [23]. Burns et al (2010:19)
- Compared with non-Indigenous juvenile offenders, Indigenous juveniles are more likely to be younger when they commit their first offence and offend more regularly than their non-Indigenous counterparts. They are thus much more likely to have a history of detention and incarceration by the time they reach adulthood [23]. Burns et al (2010:19)
- The Northern Territory incarceration rate in 2005-06 was the fifth highest in the world, with 551 people per 100,000 Territorians in prison. Figures released in June 2009 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for the March quarter show there are now 696 people in custody per 100,000 Territorians. The average incarceration rate for all of Australia is 166 people per 100,000 people....The March 2009 ABS data shows the Indigenous prison population in the Northern Territory has increased by 23 per cent in the last year - the largest jump of any state or territory....Aboriginal People are overrepresented in Australian jails. In 2006 (and still in 2008) 80% of the Northern Territory prison population was Indigenous. ANTaR (2009:1)

### **Suggestions for employers in closing the gap between policy and practice**

- Acknowledge that in the Northern Territory many Indigenous people *will have* a criminal history. Will you employ them anyway?
- What crime(s) constitute 'unsuitable for employment' in your organisation? Are you willing to consider the context and circumstance of the offence before making a policy ruling?
- Consider how long after someone has served their sentence must they be punished through lack of employment?
- In the NT, where there are more Indigenous people with a criminal record than a university degree, what would a responsible employer do to assist in closing the gap?
- Which policies relating to employment and criminal history checks could be modified to allow more Indigenous people access to employment – particularly in the NT?

## **Barrier 6: Medical Tests**

In many organisations, before permanent appointment is confirmed, applicants must pass a medical. The following statistics highlight that successfully *passing* a medical is far from automatic for Indigenous female candidates.

An Indigenous woman's employment may also be adversely affected by the family and community health and wellbeing responsibilities commonly resting on her. For instance, we have often seen clients who have been well poised to take up employment need to decline as they are unexpectedly required to take care of young grandchildren or other members of the family due to someone being unwell.

### **Some facts about Indigenous people's health**

- Death rates were higher in 2006-2008 for Indigenous females than for non-Indigenous females across all age groups... Rates and rate ratios were higher for Indigenous females living in WA, SA and the NT than for those living in NSW and Qld. Burns et al (2010:4)
- Cardiovascular disease was the leading cause of death for Indigenous females living in Qld, WA, SA and the NT in 2001-2005, with almost three times the number of deaths expected from the rate for non-Indigenous females (SMR: 2.7). The next most common causes of death for Indigenous females were neoplasms (mainly cancers) (SMR: 1.6), then external causes (SMR: 3.5), diabetes (SMR: 14.5), and respiratory diseases (SMR: 3.6). Burns et al (2010:7)
- Analysis of the 2004-2005 NATSIHS shows that more than 32% of Indigenous females reported having experienced a high or very high level of psychological distress in the previous 12 months, a level more than twice that of non-Indigenous females [11]". ... Specific stressors included "death of a family member or friend, serious illness of disability, not able to get a job, alcohol or drug related problem, overcrowding at home, family member sent to jail/in jail, and trouble with police [7]. Burns et al (2010:11)
- Importantly, deaths from intentional self-harm, were much higher for Indigenous females than for non-Indigenous females in 2003-2007 in NSW, Qld, WA, SA and the NT [7]. Suicide deaths rates for Indigenous females were between 6.7 and 17.1 per 100,000 compared with between 3.5 and 5.0 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous women particularly in the NT and SA. Burns et al (2010:12)
- The death rate from injury for Indigenous females living in Qld, WA, SA and the NT in 2002-2006 was 69 per 100,000, a rate 3.0 times that for non-Indigenous females [10]. Transport accidents and intentional self-harm were the leading causes of injury deaths for Indigenous females at rates 4.1 and 1.8 times higher than those for non-Indigenous females. Burns et al (2010:12)

## **Suggestions to employers for closing the gap between policy and practice**

- There is a high probability that a prospective Indigenous employee's level of health will be greatly lesser than that of a prospective non-Indigenous employee.  
Are you willing to employ her anyway?
- Are there recruitment policies in your organisation relating to health checks which could be modified to provide better access for Indigenous people?

## **SUMMARY**

For many Indigenous women, the barriers and disappointments of not securing mainstream employment impact on emotional and social wellbeing. Some become despondent or suffer depression and stress-related illness. Some return to their remote communities and become reliant on whatever CDEP opportunities may be available to them.

Many organisations advertise positions with the words “Indigenous people strongly encouraged to apply.” However if you are genuine about closing the gap between policy and practice; between rhetoric and results, particularly in the Northern Territory there is still much to be done – and can be done - to address the inequalities.

### **The invitation/challenge: What you can do:**

Considering the internal and external barriers which candidates will need to overcome:

- Could your existing recruitment policies and practice be a barrier to Indigenous women being employed?
- Do your policies and practices encourage Indigenous employment?
- Are you willing to change some or all existing policies to better enable employment of Indigenous women?
- Which current employment processes could be modified?
- Is everyone in your organisation willing to support the changes in practice or is recruiting more Indigenous people only deemed a valuable objective by some Units or Departments?
- Are you willing to take action now to close the gap between policy and practice when employing Indigenous people?

## References

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