

Impact Case Study

The contributions of Dr Margaret Heffernan, OAM, to public health, cross-cultural collaboration and policy

Introduction and background

Dr Margaret Heffernan, OAM, a senior lecturer at RMIT's College of Business, specialises in health innovation, focusing on the social and behavioural factors that impact health care in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

Much of her work has revolved around attitudes towards vaccines for cancer control and how these apply to public health policy and interventions in Indigenous and migrant populations. Within the Indigenous sector, she has primarily worked in women's health and business development.

Dr Heffernan's ground-breaking 2007-9 PhD on implementing HPV vaccines was the first community-participatory study to understand attitudes toward HPV vaccine in Indigenous and mixed cultural populations in Australia. It prioritised inclusive, respectful and reciprocal relationships in cross-cultural collaboration, resulting in self-determination, empowerment and the implementation of appropriate resources.

This expertise informs Dr Heffernan's ongoing research and has had a positive impact on Indigenous and migrant health outcomes, government policy and cross-cultural research methodology globally.

Since 2020, she has also [provided expertise on communicating](#) the specific needs of Melbourne's CALD populations with public Covid-19 messaging.

HPV prevention

The World Health Organisation reports that Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common viral infection of the reproductive tract and a common cause of ano-genital cancers globally.

Vaccines that protect against cancer-causing HPV 16 and 18, approved for use in many countries, can be controversial as they are most effective when administered before sexual debut. Community concerns can be exacerbated by the stigma associated with HPV infection, and for CALD communities with diverse social norms and health literacy.

Cross-cultural collaboration and methodology

Understanding the diverse attitudes and health literacy needs of consenting parents and guardians and community health professionals is a vital component of reducing opportunities for misinterpretation of sensitive HPV educational health messages.

For her PhD, Dr Heffernan undertook Indigenous cultural training in order to forge close, respectful and culturally appropriate working relationships with local communities. The research and engagement methods that Dr Heffernan developed have set a standard for fostering and embedding community-led participation in vulnerable populations.

Government health policy

Dr Heffernan's work with communities has become a benchmark for subsequent public health initiatives and immunisation policies, informing a range of government and other related projects.

The initial research

Dr Heffernan's landmark PhD project aimed to identify issues in attitudes towards HPV vaccination, prior to it being available in Australia, among:

- Parents and guardians from three cultural groups in Australia (Aboriginal [Central Australia and Victoria], Anglo, Chinese)
- General Practitioners (GPs) in Victoria
- Aboriginal Health Workers (AHWs) in Central Australia and Victoria.

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What's next...

Dr Heffernan worked with AHWs and Indigenous women in Victoria and remote parts of central Australia, facilitating discussions and open interactions with sensitivity, dedication and reciprocity to support community health.

The research found that the early HPV education resources developed for the Northern Territory (NT) were not culturally or linguistically appropriate for the Central Australian population, who had different ways of 'seeing, knowing and doing' to Top End communities. Dr Heffernan then collaborated with communities to develop sustainable ways of empowering them with this life-saving health information.

PhD outcomes

The NT Department of Health and Community Services (DHCS) developed multi-media resources in five languages common to the region. Key messages were delivered in these languages via a Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) radio campaign to inform and promote the HPV vaccine among Aboriginal communities.

Dr Heffernan also secured Federal and NT government funding for the first mobile women's health clinic for remote NT regions: Women's Health on Wheels (WHow), conceptualised by two Central Australian health workers, Sandy McElligott and Julie Smith.

Cultural resources for the Victorian Aboriginal population were developed by Victorian AHWs, led by Dr Heffernan's PhD Aboriginal Study Advisor, Peta Reynolds (Cancer Council Victoria).

The study and subsequent initiatives empowered health professionals, particularly AHWs, with proven processes and specific evidence-based cultural resources about HPV prevention and immunisation, and resulted in some of [the highest levels of HPV vaccine uptake](#) globally among adolescent females and males.

Dr Heffernan has contributed to two books on Indigenous research methodology, various publications, multiple seminars, conference presentations and media engagements, including:

As contributing author:

- ["Parent-adolescent communication about sexual and reproductive health including HIV and STIs in Oman"](#), 2021
- [IPVS Policy Statement addressing the burden of HPV disease for Indigenous peoples](#), 2020
- ["Islamic parents' attitudes and beliefs towards school-based sexual and reproductive health education programmes in Oman"](#), 2019
- ["Building an ontological framework for healthcare: The case of the health cluster"](#), 2017
- Heffernan, M. E., Garland, S. M. and Kane, M. A. 2010, 'Global reduction of cervical cancer with human papillomavirus vaccines: insights from the hepatitis B virus vaccine experience', *Sexual Health*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 383–390.
- ["Role of the nurse immuniser in implementing and maintaining the National Human Papillomavirus Cervical Cancer Vaccine rollout through a school-based program in Victoria"](#), 2010.

As contributor and reviewer:

- ["Researching Indigenous Health: a practical guide for researchers"](#), 2011
- ["Supporting Indigenous Researchers: a practical guide for supervisors"](#), 2009

Overview of the impact

Dr Heffernan's focus on cross-cultural collaborations and influencing policy through multidisciplinary research teams has led to over a decade of further projects and positive health outcomes in Australia and globally. Indicative work includes:

2008

- The [Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health \(CRCAH\)](#) showcased Heffernan's PhD research in Australia's Parliament House as an example of best practice cross-cultural collaborative research partnerships.

2009

- The WHow mobile health clinic, which began in this year, continues operation, and became the model for remote mobile health clinics for dental services and men's health.

2011-2016

- Kirridji Kirridji Wilya Ankurl Wangijul Mukku Nyinji-ki (KKWAWMN) – "many women talking strong for business" Forum, comprising fifteen highly credentialed women leaders from across Australia providing leadership, support and professional expertise to the senior traditional women leaders of the Warumungu economic development project.
- Dr Heffernan was development advisor to the Warumungu Clan in Tennant Creek NT, a partnership resulting in empowerment and strategic business direction for sustainable enterprises.
- Dr Heffernan was bestowed with the Aboriginal skin-name 'Nangali', signifying her role in the community's unique social structure.

2011

- Dr Heffernan joined the [CSIRO desertFOCUS Knowledge Group](#), a CSIRO consortium to revitalise remote Australia

2013-2020

- Dr Heffernan, Dr Bev Lawton (NZ) and Dr George Wurtak (Canada) co-founded the International Indigenous HPV Alliance, a collaboration of behavioural researchers to influence policy changes benefiting Indigenous peoples globally.
- The International Papillomavirus Society (IPVS) accepted their [policy statement](#) in 2020.

2016

- Dr Heffernan was awarded a \$20,000 GlaxoSmithKline grant for the 'Informing Community' Project with Horn of Africa migrants project. This outreach to CALD populations developed targeted community cultural resources, including a health educator HPV toolkit and HPV vaccination film.

2019

- Dr Heffernan was an expert advisor to Connected Beginnings, an Australian Health Association national project on Indigenous school student retention in remote communities.

2020

- As an expert member of the IPVS Education sub-committee, Dr Heffernan hosted a behavioural research webinar for HPV sector professionals in 2021 – "HPV behavioural research and the 2030 targets / Why HPV behavioural research and science matter: The unanswered questions". The webinar attracted 644 registrants from 90 countries, and achieved a 4.65/5 satisfaction score.

2021

- Dr Heffernan joined an international research team in Oman (MENA region) that aims to influence Omani government policy on reducing HPV morbidities.

Next steps

Dr Heffernan continues to collaborate with entities to reduce global health inequities through a strategic business and policy lens. She is currently scoping research on the impact of the pandemic on CALD communities in Melbourne after the prolonged lockdown.