Building capacity to work with families of refugee background

There has been much activity over the past couple of months in preparing people to work differently with women and families of refugee background. All Bridging the Gap working groups have identified the need for training to facilitate new ways of providing care to families.

Working together to provide community-based pregnancy information and care

Maternal and child health nurses, bicultural workers, midwives and the members of the Healthy Happy Beginnings (group pregnancy information and care for Karen women from Burma) working group spent an extended morning together in professional development activities facilitated by Foundation House and VICSEG New Futures.

First Impressions

Western Health booking clerks and front of house staff had identified the need to find ways to better ascertain and record some of the key questions to enable appropriate services to be provided, for example language support, and referral to ‘one to one’ caseload midwifery care. The ‘first impressions’ training was offered following the refugee experience session on the day of the launch of Bridging the Gap in the west. The session re-affirmed the significant contribution that front of house staff and booking clerks make to support women of refugee background as the entry point into services and provided an understanding of the reason for and ways to ask additional questions at the time of booking for care and appointments.

In the evaluation participants were asked what they would do differently as a result of training:

“I’m happy to ask the questions more now than before … and feel more confident.”
[Training participant]

Working with families of refugee background

In the south east there is much enthusiasm and commitment to getting underway with professional development activities to support maternity staff and maternal and child health nurses in caring for families of refugee background. A recent survey of staff’s training needs identified key issues that staff would welcome learning more about including; the refugee and settlement experience, health and social issues that refugees often experience and more about the services that each offer. Training facilitated by Foundation House will take place in early 2015.

In the west around 25 midwives and maternal and child health nurses attended a session on the refugee experience followed by a professional development activity with a focus on responding to trauma using Foundation House’s recovery framework. Feedback from the session was overwhelmingly positive:

“I feel more confident about “opening Pandora’s box” and asking questions re trauma.

“I found the recovery framework most helpful – heaps of ideas about how I can make a difference.”

Jen Addy, Foundation House, conducted some of the training on the day of launching Bridging the Gap in the west.
Celebrating Bridging the Gap

Western Health and the Wyndham City Council invited all those involved in Bridging the Gap in the west and other key stakeholders to a launch of the program on Tuesday 25th November 2014. Around 80 people came together for the launch, celebratory morning tea and a session on the refugee experience. Bridging the Gap was launched by A/Professor Cassandra Szoeke who spoke of Western Health’s excitement about Bridging the Gap as a co-created program which supports ongoing improvements to health services through partnership and community engagement.

Other speakers from Wyndham City Council, Western Health, VICSEG New Futures and MCRI highlighted the need for change, told moving stories of what motivated them to want to make a difference, reflected on the value of partnership and working together to ‘do things differently’, and shared the progress of Bridging the Gap initiatives in the west.

One attendee commented on the launch:

The excitement of the launch clearly demonstrates the value of working in partnership for the greater good … I feel we are part of something very special with the potential to make a real difference and effect change in how we engage with our most vulnerable populations.

Introducing Patrice Hickey

Patrice has a long history of being involved with improving maternity services across Australia and internationally. For the last few years she has been leading the introduction of Midwifery Group Practice (MGP) at Sunshine Hospital. MPG is an innovative maternity care program providing women continuity of midwifery care and a positive way for midwives to practice; building relationships with women to support them through this critical life journey. She is currently one of the key managers involved in the Bridging the Gap innovation; Healthy Happy Beginnings with group pregnancy information, support and care for Karen women from Burma.

What is it about Bridging the Gap that you think will make a difference?

Women from refugee backgrounds are often marginalised in our system even though they may have poorer outcomes. Generally they are not offered the same choices and options that other women are. This work is shifting the focus so that women with social and physical/medical needs can have the support they need for their baby to have the best start to life. Every mother wants a healthy baby and pregnancy is a great time to work with women and offer them the options and choices to start a new life well.

Patrice was recently awarded the Women’s Hospitals Australasia, Medal of Distinction. Congratulations Patrice!
DEECD’s support for Bridging the Gap

DEECD has recently made a funding contribution as a Bridging the Gap partner organisation to support the ongoing evaluation. The aims and directions of Bridging the Gap are well aligned with the recently released framework for the future of maternal and child health services in Victoria. Starting out Strong outlines the vision for Victoria’s Maternal and Child Health Service and focuses on four key areas including enhance service quality, intervene early and prevent problems from escalating and build the capacity of the MCH workforce. The opportunities to meet the early childhood health needs of vulnerable families including asylum seekers and refugees are identified.


Victorian Health Promotion Awards: Finalist

Bridging the Gap: partnerships for change in refugee child and family health, was a finalist in this year’s VicHealth Health Promotion Awards for the category Research into Action. Some of the Bridging the Gap team from MCRI and Foundation House donned their cocktail dress attire and attended the awards ceremony in early December. Whilst we didn’t win being selected as a finalist has meant that Bridging the Gap has attracted attention and now profiled within the health promotion community. We were really pleased to see that the SEMML Afghan community engagement project was highly commended in the Improving Mental Wellbeing category.

About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap is a partnership between Healthy Mothers Healthy Families research group at Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (Foundation House), maternity and maternal & child health services in Melbourne’s south east and west, primary health care networks, local and state government.

This newsletter has been put together by the Healthy Mothers Healthy Families research group at MCRI. For more information please visit http://www.mcri.edu.au/11405.aspx or contact:

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Paper: Perinatal outcomes among African women of refugee background

A recently published paper by Melanie Gibson-Helm et al reports from a study examining perinatal data for women from humanitarian and non-humanitarian source countries who gave birth at Monash Health 2002-2011. This paper identifies that migrant women of refugee background from different African regions are at greater risk of specific adverse pregnancy outcomes when compared to migrant women without a refugee background. Unplanned birth before arrival at hospital was high amongst refugee women from North Africa; and refugee women from West Africa had the highest stillbirth incidence.

The paper can be accessed at: http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2393/14/392

With best wishes for a safe and happy festive season.

Bridging the Gap