

## CASE STUDY

# CLOSING THE HEALTH GAP – DR ALICE RUMBOLD

Despite improvements in recent decades, Aboriginal women are still suffering serious problems when it comes to their reproductive health, according to South Australia's 2009 Young Tall Poppy of the Year, Dr Alice Rumbold (a senior research fellow in the Discipline of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and the Robinson Institute).

A desire to address inequalities in health has, not surprisingly, resulted in Alice working in Australia's most disadvantaged sector - remote Aboriginal communities. Alice says that indigenous people face health setbacks on a day-to-day basis, with sexually transmitted infections such as gonorrhoea and chlamydia unacceptably high in Aboriginal communities, compounded by other health problems such as diabetes, polycystic ovary syndrome and obesity.

These are all having a marked impact on the reproductive health of Aboriginal women, particularly in pregnancy outcomes. Infertility, pelvic inflammatory disease and ongoing pelvic pain are the end result of these health issues and the tragedy is that most of these conditions are largely preventable.

Alice has spent the past five years working with Aboriginal communities since graduating from the University of Adelaide in 2005 with her PhD. She worked at the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin for several years, spending weeks at a time in remote Aboriginal communities, gradually building trust and respect among Aboriginal women.

Alice states that "an enormous amount of effort and time is needed to establish a good understanding of Aboriginal culture and to break down the long-term distrust that some of these communities have of researchers."

The upside is that Aboriginal health is a key priority of both sides of politics in Australia and there is a bipartisan commitment to address the appalling inequity. In 2005 the **Close the Gap** campaign was born, calling on federal, state and territory governments to commit to closing the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation.

Alice is tackling the problem on several fronts. Her research is helping to pinpoint why there is such a high incidence of reproductive cancers in Indigenous communities and how to better detect and manage sexually transmitted infections in these remote areas.

Alice is also keen to encourage young people that studying science provides them with a lot of scope for many exciting careers, "You can travel the world, mix fieldwork with research and laboratory work, and get the opportunity to make a real difference to individuals and communities."



*"You have to put in the time to establish good relationships and sometimes this aspect is not recognised by funding bodies, which are keen to see results as quickly as possible."*

*Dr Alice Rumbold, 2009 Young Tall Poppy*

