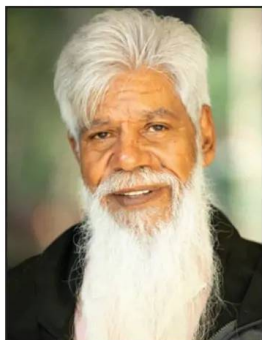


Standing strong together: building pathways for men



Associate Professor Ted Wilkes AO

I am a Wadjuk Nyungar marmun (man)
I am the Waitj (Emu)
Psewi Wagyl meowl
djiningun nidja Wadjuk Budja
(I have asked the great spirit Wagyl to bless me and look after me through life)

This article has been written on Wadjuk Nyungar land by a Nyungar man. As we live on a continent home to hundreds of Aboriginal nations and languages, and for simplicity, we will use the English word for 'men' in this column.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia we have been living the hard reality of racism, intergenerational trauma, and colonisation for a long time (this year marks 200 years since Kinjarling (Albany) in Menang Country was 'settled' by Major Edmund Lockyer, for example). Our pathways have been restricted by governments who know very little about us – and these same pathways have been weakened by the ongoing assimilationist policies damaging our lands and cultural connections. This is not our fault; we need funding and understanding to set this right. Our lands and many lives were taken and these effects reverberate across generations – but we can put structures in place to give our children the chance to grow into happy and thriving adults.

Last month I was honoured to attend the Sixth Social and Emotional Wellbeing Gathering (SEWBG6) in Walyalup/Fremantle, a deadly two-day-event for Mob (and allies) working in Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) to listen and learn from each other. The day before SEWBG6 officially started, a group of men, working in SEWB around Australia, came together to yarn about our work and our lives.



Group photo after the first men's session in Walyalup Picture: Emily Watson.



Brett Manado at SEWB Gathering 6. Picture: Emily Watson.

We shared our thoughts, ideas and lived experience with the group, having honest conversations. Everything was built on a foundation of respect for men, women, young people and Elders alike. As men, we came together undivided by language groups or homelands, but united as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with common struggles.

Our men's group met up twice across two days in Walyalup – our yarns were hosted by Michael Mitchell, a long-time champion of men's SEWB. In our group, the voices of all the men were heard. We covered questions about what good SEWB looks like, enablers and barriers for men entering the SEWB workforce, and top priorities for men's SEWB going forward. Some of our men also talked about the need for more education on the reality of SEWB work – it carries a heavy responsibility and can lead to burnout.

We're at an important time right now in the lifespan of 'men's SEWB'. Since SEWB gained national recognition as a holistic concept of health many

years ago, monumental strides have been taken in women's SEWB, led by strong women like Professor Pat Dudgeon and Professor Helen Milroy – alongside countless other incredible women working to better the wellbeing of our people.

We are lagging behind our women who are leading the way for us. The work and progress of women in this country is something for us men to aspire to. But we can take strength

'The females have left us behind'
– Leon Khan, South West Aboriginal Medical Service

from knowing we have strong men who can lead the charge to raise our SEWB.

There is no denying that more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men are needed in the SEWB workforce. We need men who understand us, and our struggles, to be in positions to support our mental health and SEWB. Psychologists make up a small portion of the SEWB workforce but the statistics here are indicative of a larger problem in SEWB: 11% of psychologists registered with the Australian

Indigenous Psychologists Association identify as male.

"She'll be right" – that's what we hear in this country, especially as men but we need to do better than that. Let's be willing to show up for ourselves, and other men, through honest and emotional conversations. I want to see us come together to address the current state of our men's SEWB and create a roadmap to a future where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men's SEWB is strong. We need to stand up and take our fight to the Wadjela (Nyungar for 'white man') in governments – we can walk loud, talk proud, and go into places we might not normally walk – and walk together.

We need more pathways for men into SEWB work and we need to fix the flawed pathways we currently have. Even though we're told SEWB workers should have 'lived experience', men are routinely overlooked for work because of a past criminal conviction. One of our men captured this by saying: "They [employers] want us to have lived experience, but not too much lived experience".

At the same time, countless stories were shared of men learning to understand and overcome their trauma, lives being changed, communities coming together, and men being mentors, role models, teachers and supporters to other men. I think the most important and persistent theme was just that: good men's SEWB is men supporting other men.

"Currently, up in the Kimberley between Fitzroy Crossing and Derby, we have over 20 registered healers, both male and female and we do healing at Derby Hospital. I'm a big believer that traditional

"It was a strong space for men to come together, yarn, and be open in a way that felt safe and grounded in culture" (Will Hunter, Kimberly Aboriginal Medical Service)

cultural healing should sit along western medicine and be used and incorporated into SEWB practices." (Brett Manado, Derby Aboriginal Health Service).

It was clear that all the men in our group cared very deeply about their communities and the people they work with and for. We were all strong in our belief in the SEWB model of care and its capacity to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. We're not going away – and if we make a commitment to stand together, united in the face of racism and inequity, we can create positive pathways for our young fellas. I left our group knowing that the future of men's SEWB was in strong hands.

Us men all said we should continue to meet and push men's SEWB forward and up. I can only hope that I will be back here again in a year, writing to you all about another men's SEWB workshop that has taken place.

For more information about men's SEWB or the SEWB Workforce, check out the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention website <https://cbpatsisp.com.au/> and the Manual of Resources for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention <https://manualofresources.com.au/>.

Associate Professor Ted Wilkes AO is a Nyungar man, with connections to the metropolitan and the south-west of Western Australia. He has worked in public health for much of his working life, including as CEO of the Derbarl Yerrigan Health Service, in research at the National Drug Research Institute and the Kids Research Institute, and as Ambassador for the Commissioner for Children and Young People. Ted is currently a Cultural Advisor at the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention at The University of Western Australia.