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Cultural safety – what does it mean for our work practice?

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Abstract

Culturally safe service delivery is critical in enhancing personal empowerment and, as a result, should promote more effective and meaningful pathways to self determination for Indigenous people. Little has been said about encouraging people from Indigenous groups into the health and education discipline(s) to help provide a safe environment which includes cultural safety. This is a phrase originally coined by Maori nurses which means that there is *no assault on a person's identity*. The people most able or equipped to provide a culturally safe atmosphere are people from the same culture.

We need to move on from the 'short term, cost effective, quick fix' approach to Indigenous issues, driven by economic imperatives, the clamouring of industry and conservative, hegemonic practices. To genuinely address the challenges of Indigenous health and education, the issue of cultural safety cannot be avoided. Critical reflection on experiential knowledge and defining or framing a debate on cultural safety is essential. This paper briefly examines some considerations for work practice.

(Aust N Z J Public Health 1999; 23: 213-214)

The issue and concept of cultural safety has been around for some time, most notably through the work done by Maori nurses[1] and other health professionals.

A commonly accepted definition of cultural safety is 'an environment which is safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening'.[2]

For Indigenous people, cultural safety is essentially a basic right recognised at international levels.

There is no question as to the validity, or any lack of understanding. However, for many non-Indigenous people, cultural safety raises few questions and even fewer 'eyebrows'.

To facilitate culturally safe environments, those of us who are working in cross-cultural situations must address this issue at all professional and personal levels.

Cultural safety

Culturally appropriate programs/approaches are crucial in enhancing personal empowerment and as a result, promote more effective service delivery (be it education, health or whatever) for Indigenous people. The people most able or equipped to provide a culturally safe atmosphere are people from the same culture. This would seem to be stating the obvious, so why does it seem so hard to do or to 'get it right'?

Why?

A matter of priority for any organisation involved in service delivery for Indigenous clients has to be to critically evaluate their work practice and determine pathways to genuine empowerment for the aforementioned clients and all the Indigenous stakeholders. Otherwise the rhetoric of self determination, social justice and reconciliation will never become reality, and will be destined to be relegated to the 'dustbin' of buzzwords that have passed their 'use by date'; thus perpetuating structural violence and systemic frustration, amongst other things.

How?

For those contemplating working or already working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it should be a regular and compulsory exercise to examine preconceived ideas and stereotypes.

This is especially true if more than lip service is to be paid and for rhetoric to become action in overcoming racist attitudes and discrimination practices in service delivery and the principles of social justice become positive actions.[3] Part of the intention of this paper is to open the topic up for debate, to encourage people to examine their organisation, programs and their work practice and ask some hard questions as to the 'what, how, when, where and why' of cultural safety.

The obvious question is how do we do this? How do we 'do' cultural safety? Each group or organisation would have to work on this in a number of ways. This may in-

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clude planning for appropriate program and infrastructure changes, and perhaps using an action research framework based on questions such as the following:

- What is the reason for (each particular) service to exist? What is the purpose of the organisation? Why do individuals work there?
- What does cultural safety mean for the organisation?
- How can we ensure that Indigenous clients are given a 'second chance' (or even a first chance) at gaining an appropriate and meaningful service delivery?
- How can we counteract or debunk the commonly held myth that by focusing skills, knowledge and understandings on particular groups (who for various historical and political reasons have 'special or particular needs') that we are 'lowering the standards' or 'maintaining an apartheid environment'?
- Irrespective of the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of criticisms of educational institutions and health services, how can we address these criticisms in a constructive and positive manner?
- How can we ensure that we do not continue assimilationist and destructive practices, thus perpetuating structural violence and systemic frustration?

Some suggested 'minimum or 'generic' requirements to work towards a set of principles or guidelines for cultural safety :

- Respect for culture, knowledge, experience, obligations.
- No assault on a person's identity or dignity.
- Clearly defined pathways to empowerment and self determination.
- Recognition of the right to promote, develop and maintain own institutional structures, distinctive customs, traditions, procedures and practices.
- Recognition of more than one set of principles, one way of doing things.
- Commitment to the theory and practice of cultural safety by personnel and trained staff.
- Debunking of the myth that all Indigenous people are the same.
- Working with where people are at and not where you want them to be.
- 'Right to make own mistakes', people doing it for themselves, being active and not passive.

- Careful negotiation of power "outside" professional skills and knowledge which maybe used to enhance decision making.
- Make the time required for skills and context to develop a certain level of understanding, otherwise the knowledge and skills of outsiders can dominate organisational directions.
- Needs to be consistent ongoing broad approaches (not one cause, one solution).
- Communicate co-operatively.
- Clarification of the place and role of non Indigenous staff.
- Emphasis on community control or ownership which does not abdicate professionals from the responsibilities of their job and other obligations.

Conclusion

We need to move on from the 'short-term, cost-effective, quick-fix' approaches, driven by economic imperatives, the clamouring of industry and conservative, hegemonic practices. We need to move on in order to genuinely address the challenges of cultural safety and service delivery.

The issue of cultural safety cannot be avoided. Programs and practices will continue to perpetuate assimilationist practices if this critical issue is not dealt with upfront.

Cultural safety must not be allowed to drift away because it is too hard or too confronting. There is a paucity of broad based literature on this area, and if nothing else practitioners and clients must be urged to contribute to the debate. We must take note of the excellent work being carried out in the nursing profession and expand the ideas in order to meet structural and systemic challenges.

References

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