

The Healing Through Community Grieving Fathers Project – Framework for Community Consultation

An SMS4Deadlydads project in partnership with Red Nose to codesign text messages and associated resources to support First Nations fathers in the event of pregnancy loss or stillbirth.

Context

SMS4dads and SMS4DeadlyDads

SMS4dads (www.sms4dads.com) commenced in 2014 to deliver text messages to fathers from early in the pregnancy until one year post birth. Fathers enrol via the website with a minimal set of demographic questions and receive approximately three brief (160 character) texts per week. Since 2021 the program has been funded by the Department of Health to offer the service nationally and to develop appropriate messaging for fathers in rural and remote areas and for First Nations fathers. SMS4DeadlyDads was launched in October 2022 and currently has enrolments from every region in Australia. In 2023 SMS4Dads partnered with Red Nose to co-design messages for (mainstream) fathers following pregnancy loss or stillbirth and commenced the Healing Through Community Grieving Fathers Project.

Pregnancy loss and stillbirth

Perinatal loss, the loss of a baby through miscarriage, stillbirth, or neonatal death, can be a devastating event for expecting parents. In Australia pregnancy loss occurs in about one in four pregnancies, seven out of every 1,000 expecting couples will experience a stillbirth and there are 2.5 neonatal deaths for every 1,000 live births¹. Mothers and fathers may experience a range of intense physical and emotional reactions in response to the loss of their baby during the pregnancy or in the months after the birth, and ongoing adverse mental health co-morbidities can be long lasting.^{2,3} Their relationship can also be affected and lead, in some cases, to separation or divorce.⁴ Although both parents will be impacted by perinatal loss, their reactions to the loss and their access to support services may differ widely.⁵

Service provision

Mainstream services across the perinatal period are staffed largely by women, are focused on the wellbeing of mother and baby and, while officially welcoming of both parents, have low levels of engagement with fathers.⁶ Indigenous-led services have a similar pattern of gendered staffing and attendance which may also be influenced by cultural factors such as men's and women's business and the roles and responsibilities surrounding birth and newborn care. A father may have little access to information about the services provided during pregnancy and childbirth and be ill equipped to ask appropriate questions and contribute to shared decision-making, either in support of his partner or for his own support needs.^{7,8}

Colonisation and men's role in the family.

Colonization has been damaging to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males' connection to spiritual and physical resources. The massacres, forced relocations, and 'stolen generations' have undermined men's ability to act as a decision-maker, provider, educator and role model within their community and within their immediate family.^{9,10} Without connection to country and connection through enacting specific male roles within the community men can be left without an identity, unable to discern the appropriate actions as a father, uncle, grandfather, risking shame and

embarrassment when interacting with services and lacking the confidence to care for their partners and infants.¹¹

Consultation with communities

Guidelines

In approaching First Nations communities there are established guidelines to ensure the cultural safety of those involved. The NHMRC guidelines include 6 core values which must be taken into account: spirit and integrity, cultural continuity, equity, reciprocity, respect, and responsibility. The AH&MRC lists 5 key principles of ethical research with Aboriginal communities: net benefits for Aboriginal people and communities, Aboriginal community control of research, cultural sensitivity, reimbursement of costs and enhancing Aboriginal skills and knowledge.^{12,13}

Investigations into complex trauma assessment conducted as part of the Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future (HPNF) project have also provided guidelines relevant to the task of discussing perinatal loss with community members.¹⁴ The Alice Springs workshop involving 25 institutions identified six critical overarching themes: ensuring emotional and cultural safety; establishing relationships and trust; having capacity to respond appropriately and access support; incorporating less direct cultural communication methods (e.g., yarning, dadirri); using strengths-based approaches and offering choices to empower parents; and showing respect, caring and compassion.

The consultation approach described below also follows the model developed to inquire about Aboriginal men's sexual health and young Aboriginal fathers' health, starting with trust-building contact at the organisation level and utilising local First Nations men to reach and engage individual fathers.^{15, 16}

Description of consultation stages

Phase 1		
Initial contact	Recruitment	Approach
Visit by team to Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations and stakeholders	Using contacts from previous work together approaches are made to organisations	Introducing team members, explaining HTC Grieving Fathers project and its relation to SMS4DeadlyDads. Key questions: What support is available for dads in perinatal period? Would a text messaging service be useful for these fathers?
What have we learned? Reflection on meeting notes. Phone contact with individuals within organisations to clarify points and arrange invitations to Phase 2		
Feedback to community summarising overall findings from visit sent to all contacts		
Phase 2		
Workshop	Recruitment	Approach
Discuss exiting support for fathers and consider draft texts for grieving fathers	Contacts from Phase 1 and other stakeholders invited by leaflet to attend in person	Introductions from participant services., explaining HTC Grieving Fathers project and its relation to SMS4DeadlyDads. Hear from existing men's group leaders. Consider small number of draft texts.
What have we learned? Reflection on workshop notes. Phone contact with individuals within organisations to clarify points and arrange invitations to Phase 3		
Feedback to community summarising overall findings from workshop sent to all contacts		
Phase 3a		
Activity	Source	Possible Actions
Responding to innovative suggests/requests from community members	Ideas such as: text in language; dads with infants removed; specific text phrases to use	Follow up to clarify a) strength of idea – viewed as essential or just a suggestion? b) practical steps including costs to implement
What have we learned? Reflection on discussions. Phone contact with individuals within organisations to clarify points and develop response.		
Feedback to individuals making suggestion and document summarising overall findings from discussions sent to all contacts. If necessary, approach funding body to consider additional budget.		
Phase 3b		
Workshop/Email	Recruitment	Approach
Draft messages considered in workshop format or sent to individuals to rate.	Contacts from Phase 1 & 2 and other stakeholders invited by leaflet or email to attend in person or provide feedback on draft texts	Consistent with previous co-design development of text materials ratings on draft texts (eg. easy to understand, culturally safe, suitable for recent pregnancy loss or pervious) are tabulated and low scoring texts removed. Remaining texts are edited following suggestions ^{17, 18}
Edited messages considered in workshop format or sent to individuals to rate	Those involved in previous evaluation recontacted to review edited version.	Ratings on edited texts are tabulated and low scoring texts removed. Remaining texts are edited following suggestions. In cases of disagreement First Nations ratings are privileged over non Indigenous stakeholder ratings
Note: This rating process is repeated as often as necessary with ongoing discussion of key areas of confusion or disagreement		
Feedback report sent to all participants		
Phase 3c		
Lived experience perspective	Recruitment	Approach
Fathers from community engaged to provide their	Local First nations men use community	Fathers are engaged as 'advisors' respecting their knowledge of the situation of new fathers in their

perspective on support needed by fathers 'when things don't go well'	knowledge to approach young fathers	community. Through yarning in groups or individually suggestions for support are matched with texts from Phase 3b and used to design supportive material to be linked to the text. Father Advisors also rate the final set of texts from Phase 3b and in cases of disagreement Father Advisors' ratings are privileged over other ratings
Final set of messages launched. Where possible, community members and Father Advisors attend and receive recognition for their contributions		
Phase 4		
Messages included in SMS4DeadlyDads with mechanisms for direct enrolment after perinatal loss and evaluation of the suitability and impact of the messages on grieving fathers		
Final report to Red Nose		

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