

# Making ground on Murri health



progress on Indigenous health around. He grew up in Gladstone and was the only child in his family to finish year 12. Wenitong, 48, studied at the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education (now the University of Southern Queensland) and went on to work as a pathology laboratory technician, before deciding to study medicine in the early 1990s. He graduated from the University of Newcastle in 1994, where he had been one of the first Aboriginal medical students.

Working at the innovative, holistic-focused Wuchopperen Aboriginal Medical Service and sitting on various national health committees, Wenitong is directly involved in the development of Indigenous healthcare delivery.

Key gains in recent years include the development and stabilisation of community-run healthcare centres similar to Wuchopperen.

"We've now got 25 other medical services built on the community-controlled model operating in Queensland," Wenitong says.

"They are autonomous and are focused on training and employing Indigenous people.

"Our approach to healthcare is to try to be responsive in a holistic way. We are running a lot of really good programs that we're finding are achieving success," he says.

The need for (and long-standing lack

of) cultural sensitivity in healthcare delivery to Indigenous Australians is well documented. Wenitong says these grass roots health services are making a big impact in terms of redressing this problem. Simultaneously, in mainstream healthcare work is underway to ensure that all healthcare workers – and in particular doctors – are given appropriate training to communicate effectively with Indigenous patients.

The Indigenous Doctors Association, of which Wenitong is the President-Elect, has helped develop a project on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health framework curriculum with the Committee of Deans of Australian Medical Schools.

"We are hopeful that the AMC (Australian Medical Council) will sign off on it to make it part of medical school accreditation," Wenitong explains.

"We are also looking at the specialist colleges' training curriculum.

"And of course, in the case of James Cook University, the medical course was developed with a strong slant on providing doctors to fulfill Indigenous health needs," he says.

Getting more Indigenous people through medical courses to improve Aboriginal doctor numbers is another matter.

On this score, as Wenitong explains, there is still very much 'a way to go'.

"There is a new Productivity Commission report that tells us there has

been an increase in Indigenous graduates in primary and high school, which is good news," he says.

"It's just that some people have contested this data.

"I mean, hopefully we are going forward."

A serious stumbling block, according to Wenitong, is that most of the Indigenous kids who are finishing high school are not leaving with the necessary pre-requisites to study health science courses such as medicine.

"Without wanting to appear negative about humanities subjects, we need to start recruiting a lot more strongly in the health science subjects in high school," he says.

"We need a lot more doctors working in Indigenous healthcare – and that's black and white.

"It strikes me as sad that Indigenous health is largely skilled with overseas-trained-doctors.

"Australians who work in Indigenous health are the most passionate people you will ever meet – there just aren't enough of them.

"A lot of Australian doctors go overseas to do aid work and I wish they would stay here. That's said as a challenge rather than a criticism," he says.

Challenge set

**-SARAH HARDING**



*I*t might not be happening as quickly as it could be, but bit by bit we are starting to 'get it' in terms of Indigenous health needs, says Cairns GP Mark Wenitong.

Wenitong, who hails from the Gubbi Gubbi tribe of southern Queensland and is one of just 10 Indigenous doctors practising in Queensland, spoke about Indigenous health issues at the recent RACGP conference in north Queensland.

He's well qualified on the subject.

Senior Medical Officer with the Wuchopperen Aboriginal Medical Service in Cairns and a senior lecturer at James Cook University's Medicine, Health and Molecular Sciences Faculty, Wenitong is one of the still-too-small band of Australian healthcare professionals who are working to turn the country's lagging