Navigating Rigour and Responsiveness

Evaluating a First Nations Community-led Diabetes Prevention Program in Central Australia

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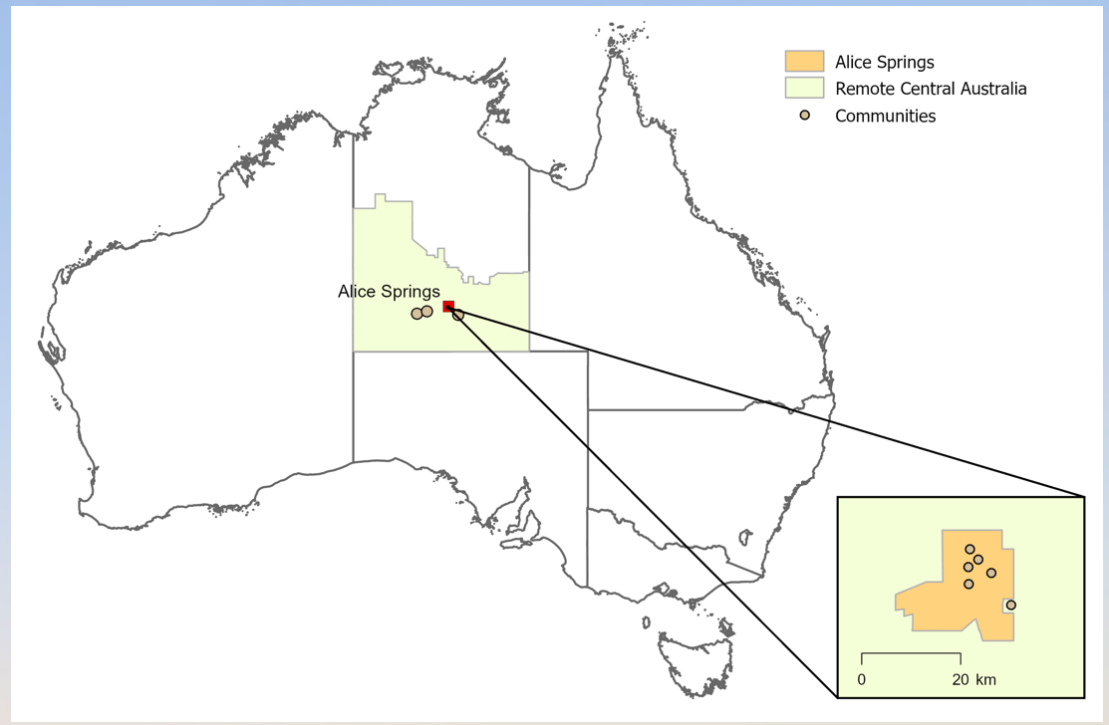
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A journey navigating different ways of working

Central Australia

- A culturally rich and diverse region
- Many distinct languages spoken
- Strong connection to kinship, culture, country, lore and language
- 12 communities in and around Mparntwe/Alice Springs



The social, political, cultural & historical determinants of health





Transforming Indigenous Mental Health & Wellbeing, 2026

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Type 2 diabetes in Central Australia

- Prevalence **highest in the world**
  - 40% of Aboriginal adults[1]
  - 1 in 70 young Aboriginal people under 25 years old[2]

Healthy food 40% more in remote areas[3]

71% of Aboriginal people report discrimination[4]



[1]Hare et al, BMJ Open 2022
[2]Titmuss et al, Lancet Diab Endo 2021
[3]Northern Territory Government, 2026
[4]Wright et al, J Rural Studies, 2022

What is the Merne Mwerre Artweye Areye-ke program?

- Means ‘good food for the whole family’ in local Arrernte language
- A community-led diabetes prevention & healthy lifestyle program





Key components of Merne Mwerre Artweye Areye-ke

- Family-centred
- 10 sessions delivered in location chosen by community
- Aboriginal facilitators
- Content is flexible to accommodate local priorities
- Parents lead activities & contribute knowledge & language



Merne Mwerre Artweye Areye-ke Program

Good food for all the family

Session 1: What is health - Water is Best
This session introduces the program, builds rapport with participants, discusses the meaning of health and how that looks for each family. It also addresses the impact of sugar-sweetened beverages on health.

Session 2: Traditional Foods & Whole Foods
Enhances knowledge and skills of core food groups as well as draw on the strengths of traditional bush foods and practices.

Session 3: Whole Foods - Grow Foods
This session focusses on different protein foods (grow foods) and their function in the body.

Session 4: Mindfulness & Self-care - Glow Foods
Increase awareness of holistic health and the importance of mindfulness, self-care and self-compassion, intertwining the concept of 'Glow' foods.

Session 5: Joyful Movement & Go Foods
To increase knowledge and skills surrounding the benefits of physical activity, exercising safely, and increasing access to fitness resources in the community. It further raises awareness of 'Go' foods and their role in the body.

Session 6: Balancing your plate - Slow Foods
This session looks at ways we can include a balanced meal to try and eat from all food groups to get adequate nutrition, as well as learn about the impact of 'slow' foods in the body.

Session 7: Healthy Meals on a Budget
This session explores cheap, healthy meal ideas ~$20 to feed a family as well as healthier takeaway options and label reading.

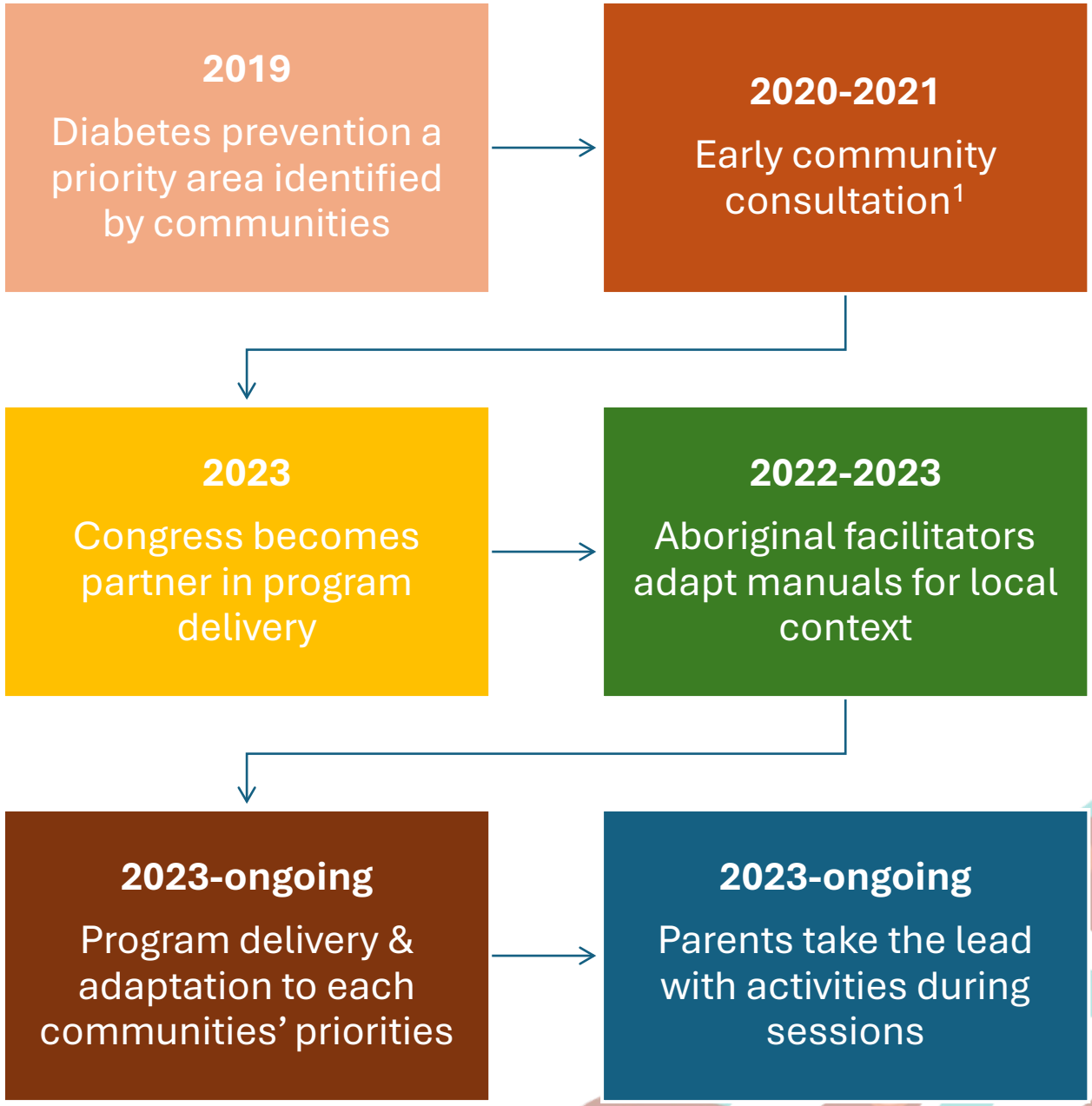
Session 8: Healthy Choices at the Supermarket
This session aims to share practical ways to make healthy choices when shopping at the supermarket.

Session 9: Looking After Ourselves

Session 10: Summary & Celebration
This session aims to celebrate all learnings from the previous weeks and acknowledge the participation of families in the program.

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Community leadership & decision-making



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[1]*Rohit et al, International Journal of Environmental Research & Public Health 2021*

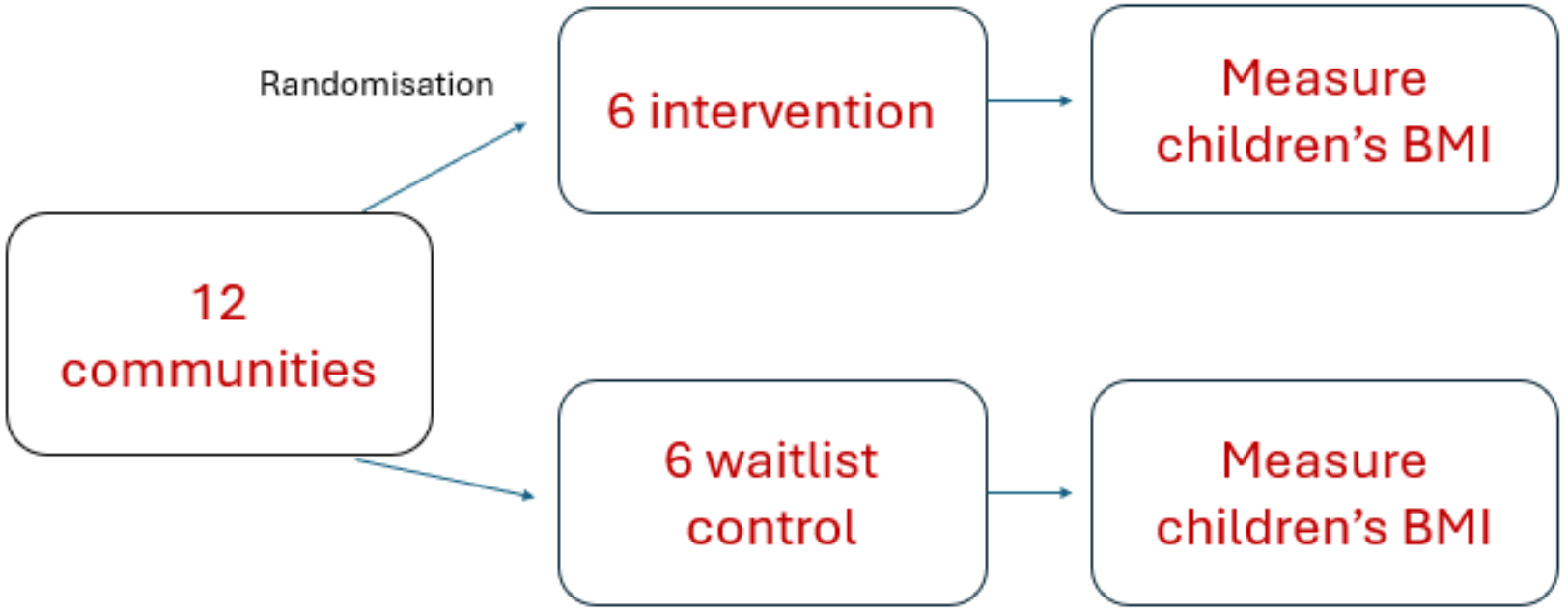
Western scientific study design

Aim: To assess the clinical effect of the program on body mass index (BMI) among children compared to usual community activities

Study design: Randomised controlled trial (RCT)

Planned sample size: 150 child/caregiver pairs

Data collection: Baseline, 3, 6, 9, 12 & 24 months



The ethical tension…

Can we genuinely do both?

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What does success look like in this program?

- Connection
- Relationships
- Sustainability
- Opportunities
- Confidence
- Leadership
- Working holistically
- Learning together

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What happens when community knowledge and western study designs don't align?



“I think we have come to realise that we can’t always be bound by western scientific rigour, otherwise we don’t get to see what the full beautiful potential of Aboriginal leadership can be.”

Principal Investigator

“The randomised control trial has been informed by the richness of community… The design also has to allow for life”

Aboriginal Chief Investigator

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What have been some of the assumptions, trade-offs and lessons learned?

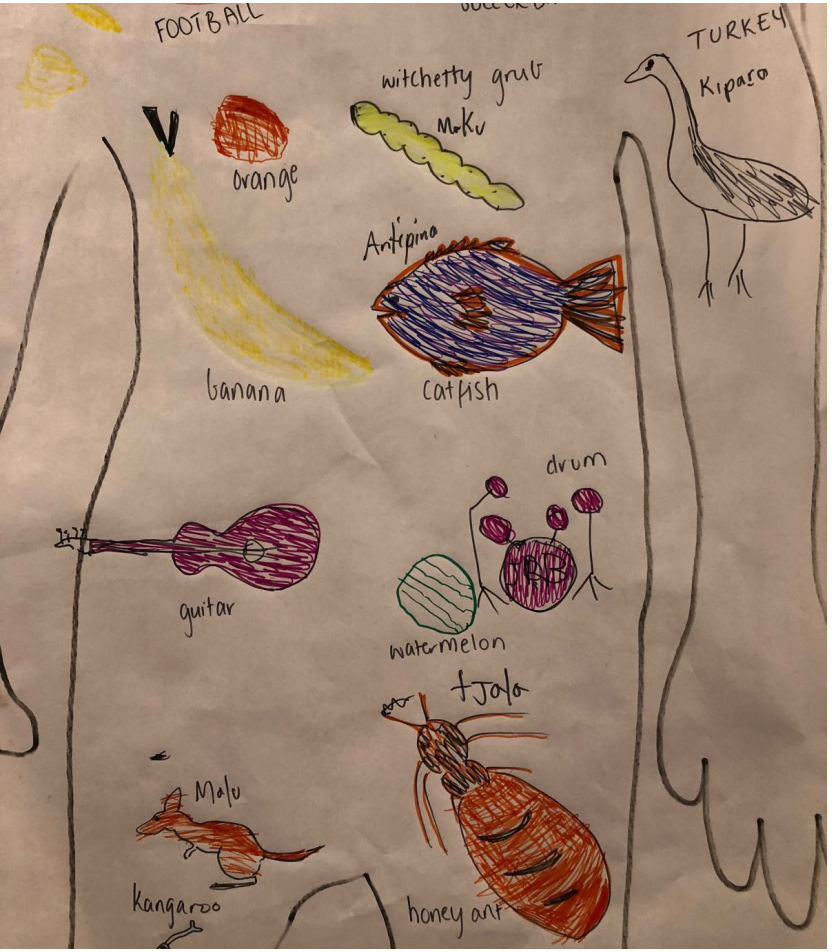




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How have we shifted power?







"It's about sharing, not showing them, sharing with families.. practical easy affordable ideas, recipes... and learning from them" (Aboriginal Facilitator)

Rigour comes from responsiveness:



“When are you coming back? I want to do cooking with you again!” (Child participant)

Meeting people where they are at.

Listening.

Drawing on the strengths in every community.

The richness of community leadership.

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