

Dispossessed, Dispirited and Diseased: Aboriginal Health and Why Racists Can't Fix It

Andrew Gunn

*John Wayne slaughtered our Indian brothers
Burned their villages and raped their mothers...
Late show Indian or Mexican dies
Klan propaganda legitimized
("John Wayne was a Nazi" MDC 1981)*

It's tough losing a war of conquest. The historical record confirms that, in all times and places, defeated peoples whose land is seized do badly. This is despite history being written (read: sanitised) by the victors.

Most societies have chronic sores, which fester away despite apparently determined attempts to heal them. The situation of indigenous Australians—"the Aboriginal problem"—remains a wound on our national psyche that we prefer to forget. Almost everybody, regardless of political orientation, wishes the issue would go away but Aboriginal health statistics provide an objective and niggling reminder that something is extremely wrong.

The Australian Medical Association and medical colleges typically have good policies on Aboriginal health. This isn't surprising. Medical organisations tend to have good policies on anything—even if that occasionally seems close to nothing—that doesn't conflict with the more self-centred interests of their members.

Unfortunately, the AMA and colleges have less success lobbying for reforms to improve Aboriginal health than for reforms to improve doctors' wealth. In part, this is because more doctors get worked into a lather by their incomes slipping below triple the national average than by Aborigines having a life expectancy a couple of decades lower than other Australians.

And, in part, it's because Aboriginal health problems often have little to do with their widespread lack of medical care. Medical care cannot solve every health issue and Aboriginal health is a good illustration of this.

I flicked through a magazine earlier today and read an absorbing article on baboons. Sorry if this seems tangential but I was interested to read baboon societies can be quite violent and, like those of other primates, are very hierarchical. A baboon's status is largely determined by their social position at birth,

Dr Andrew Gunn is (among other things) a Brisbane-based general practitioner, national treasurer of the Doctors Reform Society and editor of this fine publication: New Doctor.

and it is of central importance to their lives. Sound familiar?

It should because status is integral to human life too. And, although contemporary societies might feature more upward and downward mobility than traditional ones, we still meander through life within boundaries largely determined before birth; and, all the time, we compare ourselves with others—both within and outside our community.

This is highly relevant to health. There's compelling research evidence that it's good for your health to feel in control of your life and to feel that you have the respect of others. Lower social status is associated with lower life expectancy, independently of risk factors like obesity and smoking, and the greater the social disparity the greater this effect.

Many people tend towards chronic insecurity and fearfulness. This may not be particularly remarkable. Not only are human pecking orders stressful, particularly if they're grossly inequalitarian, but we live on a planet whose apex predator is a disturbingly rapacious carnivore that's easily moved to extreme violence. Who wouldn't get nervous about that?

Of course, not every human wanders around thoughtlessly thwacking things to death. Some of us are sweet and gentle vegetarian peaceniks who drive old Kombis. So maybe that's why I'm slightly reluctant to follow a certain train of thought—after all, some truths are best left unexplored—but let's do it anyway. Treat this as a call to cognition, not a call to confrontation.

My question is this: would Aborigines would feel better about themselves, and therefore have better health today, if their forebears had been more successful fighting European invaders?

Consider Aboriginal pride in Pemulwuy, a warrior of the Eora people, one-time owners of prime Sydney real estate—about 1800 square kilometres of it. Unfortunately, sea pirates and trespassers insisted on moving onto Eora land. The trespassers killed some of the locals, and Pemulwuy killed some of the invaders. Tit-for-tat slayings, or most likely an unequal struggle of several tits per tat, went on for years.

The bringers of civilisation to this dark land eventually killed Pemulwuy. As was the custom for unusually stropky natives, his head was severed and dispatched to the motherland in spirits, presumably because the English lacked the skill to shrink it.

And, of course, similar defeats were replicated across the continent over the next century or so. Indigenous Australians—

badly out-gunned and often out-numbered—lost the lot.

Tragically, many also lost the plot.

A human community's pride and spirit rests on many things. Sadly, these include fighting effectively. It is hugely dispiriting to be easily defeated by invading forces.

Another source of pride is tool making, and this continent's inhabitants paid dearly for their millennia of isolation. Woomeras and boomerangs remain brilliant innovations but the guns and metal of the invaders must surely have severely shaken the locals' confidence in their abilities.

Bows and arrows must have proved more effective than spears because Native Americans created sufficient trouble for children to play Cowboys and Indians. Sometimes the Indians even won.

Our Prime Minister probably enjoyed being Deputy Sheriff but I doubt if he ever played Jackaroos and Aborigines. That conflict must have been too one-sided to capture the imagination. It may not be entirely unrelated that the deficit in life expectancy of Native Americans is today about one-third that of Indigenous Australians.

But, as previously noted, this is not a call to arms. That's an ugly horse to back and, anyway, it bolted a couple of centuries ago. I listened to angry young Aboriginal men speak at a depressing rally last year regarding the death of Cameron

Doomadgee in police custody on Palm Island, and left convinced that violence can now only further marginalise and disempower Aboriginal people.

Mahatma Gandhi, who admittedly had numbers on his side, demonstrated that there are more elegant ways to accrue power. The gains made by Aboriginal people—for instance recognition in the 1967 referendum or land rights—have not been through violence but through endurance and appeals to the rationality of powerful whites.

Unfortunately, rationality is not a strong point of our nation's current leaders. The chances of significantly improving Aboriginal health are remote when the federal government is too intellectually and morally bankrupt to even admit the blindingly obvious—no community willingly gives away its land and homes.

The pitifully inadequate funding of indigenous health programs needs to be fixed but it is just a symptom of the underlying cause of poor Aboriginal health. A better indicator of causation was the recent study in Arnhem Land, which showed Aboriginal communities that are connected with, and care for, their ancestral homelands have better health.

Indigenous Australians need to be accorded, and treated with, a respect that has sadly been lacking. Severely fractured human relationships can take generations to repair but simply saying "sorry" is always a nice way to start.

