

Dr Sophie Hickey is an applied sociologist at the Molly Wardaguga Research Centre, Charles Darwin University. As an early career researcher, Sophie works in a very multidisciplinary team and uses innovative and collaborative research methods to improve health services for First Nations people.

Since 2015, Sophie has project managed a participatory action research project—the Indigenous Birthing in an Urban Setting study—in partnership with industry partners to redesign maternity care First Nations families. This research has informed changes led to a profound reduction of preterm birth (~50%) among women having First Nations babies through the Birthing in Our Community service (the intervention), compared to other women having First Nations baby/ies and receiving standard care at the same hospital (Kildea et al. 2021). This equates to 25 preterm births prevented. This is truly significant considering preterm birth has not improved for First Nations families across Australia since the beginning of the Closing the Gap strategy, initiated over 10 years ago.

By intentional research design, the participatory action research approach used meant the team made changes to the Birthing in Our Community service in response to the needs of First Nations families throughout the study period. This was achieved by Sophie regularly presenting interim study findings to the Steering Committee generated from the mixed method design (longitudinal surveys with over 600 women, analysis of clinical data and qualitative interviews with women and staff.) For example, interim study findings highlighted early improvements in preterm birth and antenatal attendance, likely due to improved relationships with health staff enabled through continuity of carers (named midwife and First Nations workforce). The service was popular with women, yet her research found the service was far exceeding capacity and midwives were burning out. First Nations families in the study were also experiencing significant social-economic hardship (financial insecurity, housing instability, significant life stressors). She collated this evidence to inform a successful funding bid (\$600,000, 2016) to Qld Health to double the service capacity, increase First Nations Family support workers and add a community-based social worker and perinatal psychologist to the team. This was the mechanism that was crucial to increasing health gains for First Nations families outlined above.

As a consequence of the research, women receiving the Birthing in Our Community service were also more likely to attend five or more antenatal visits and more likely to exclusively breastfeed on discharge from hospital compared to women having First Nations baby/ies and accessing standard care at the same hospital. There were also fewer medical interventions in labour/birth, increased access to a First Nations family support worker and known midwife through their pregnancy, birth and postnatal journey, fewer statutory child removals, increased opportunities to connect with other First Nations families and Elders through community days and regular events at the community hub, as well as a ten-fold increase in First Nations staff working on the program.

Informed by a sociological and systems approach, Sophie initiated the RISE Framework that documents her team's systematic approach to implementing similar services by R-educating the health service, I-nvesting in the workforce, S-trengthening family capacities and E-mbedding First Nations governance throughout the processes. Of the 9 publications included in the paradigm-shifting program of research Sophie was first author on 55%. In these papers, Sophie found new ways to understand how service changes could be made to collaboratively enable systemic change that meets the needs of community partners. Sophie generated timely research reports to Steering Committee of industry partners (Mater Mothers Hospital, Institute for Urban Indigenous Health,

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service Brisbane Ltd), detailing the current state, challenges and recommendations for practice. This research, including recommendations for other services, has been published in leading peer-review journals such as *Lancet Global Health* (Kildea et al. 2021), the *Lancet's EClinicalMedicine* (Kildea et al. 2019) and *Women and Birth* (Hickey et al. 2019; Hickey et al. 2021). In addition to publishing details about community engagement mechanisms in the service design (Kildea et al. 2018) and study outcomes (Kildea et al. 2021; Kildea et al. 2019), Sophie has also published learnings from the process of establishing the new service, including measures to improve teamwork to enable culturally safe care (Hickey et al. 2019), and change management (Hickey et al. 2020).

Sophie led all workshop capacity building activities and all qualitative research within the Indigenous Birthing in an Urban Setting study and its numerous sub-studies, including training and supervising a team of 20+ emerging First Nations community researchers and postgraduate students. She also led the conception, analysis, manuscript writing and harmonisation of author comments for all Indigenous Birthing in an Urban Setting study publications.

Sophie co-coordinates an international coalition of Indigenous maternal and infant health researchers united in the common goal to use Indigenous-led research as activism for perinatal health gains. Sophie is currently on the Executive Committee of [HSRAANZ](#), convenor for [TASA Applied Sociology](#) Thematic Group, and co-ordinator and co-founder of the [Australian Institutional Ethnography Network](#).

Sophie's work has been translated into Yolgnu Matha (Ireland et al. 2020) and is informing community-led health service changes for First Nations communities across the Top End NT and regional NSW. It was used by the Aboriginal community-controlled sector to inform the development of their sexual and reproductive health promotion video 'Deadly Women Talk Contraception' on Aboriginal Health TV reaching over 1million First Nations viewers per month in Australia. In addition, her work has informed IUIH's sexual and reproductive health and Men's health strategies; and has been cited in policy documents including in Queensland Health's (2019) Growing Deadly Families Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Maternity Services Strategy 2019-2025, a report to the Close the Gap Steering Committee (2019), and the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy by the Productivity Commission (2019). This program of work on improving maternity care for First Nations families has received media attention (eg SBS News, ABC local and national news, ABC Radio Health Report; NITV, local First Nations community radio services).