ARC Discovery Project
Understanding Indigenous experiences of architectural settings to improve Indigenous health outcomes: Does design matter?

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Many Indigenous people fail to present for health care until chronically ill, due to fear or dislike of health services and their settings. Across a range of building scales, this research aims to understand how design in healthcare architecture (clinics, hospitals) affects Indigenous people’s use and perceptions of these environments (waiting rooms, wards, etc.) to facilitate their well-being and their consequent motivation to access health care services.

As the first piece of systematic empirical research on the role that healthcare architectural design plays in Indigenous health, this study has the potential to change healthcare architecture in Australia. It will provide evidence for hospital administrators and architects to design more culturally appropriate healthcare environments that aim to increase Indigenous visitation rates to healthcare settings and thereby improve patient well-being.

Ultimately, this project seeks to answer the question, “when it comes to health service engagement, does design matter to Indigenous people, and how does it affect their decisions around accessing health care?”

This aim is further articulated in the following four research questions:

1. What are the typical architectural characteristics of existing healthcare settings?
2. What attracts/prevents Indigenous people to access health services and what is the relative importance of the environment?
3. What are Indigenous people’s perceptions of healthcare settings (both positive and negative attributes)?
4. What are the setting design elements and strategies that promote Indigenous access and re-access to healthcare?

In order to answer these research questions, the project uses a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. These include:

- using administrative data to profile the current health status and healthcare practices of Indigenous people in Australia;
- interviewing architects to profile the past, present and future of healthcare architectural design in Australia;
- interviewing healthcare administrators and service personnel, to understand their perspectives and experiences around healthcare architecture and how it impacts the health of Indigenous people; and
- surveying and interviewing Indigenous members of the public (approximately 600 people in total), using innovative online technology and photograph techniques to gain rich knowledge about their healthcare-related experiences, perspectives, preferences and behaviours.

The study will be conducted over three years (from 2016 to the end of 2018) across Queensland, with interviews conducted in Brisbane, Townsville, Mt Isa and Normanton. This will enable us to gain knowledge from people who live in remote, rural town, regional city, and capital city locations. This is valuable as there may be differing types of health beliefs and experiences of Western service settings across different community types. The choice of locations for the study is also based on Indigenous circular mobility patterns, allowing us to obtain views and perceptions from Indigenous people requiring different levels of healthcare and prevention treatment.

This is an Indigenous Design Place initiative of the University of Queensland.