

26 May 2020

## “Health Diary of a Community”

### Summary

#### ***A web forum discussing COVID-19 African-Australian Community Health Impacts***

*Date of the forum: Saturday, 23 May 2020, 2:00-3:30pm*

*Facilitated by: Candice Peroumal and Dr Vincent Ogu, Africa Health Australia*

*Guest speaker: Dr Mike Kamara from Sierra Leone, practices obstetrics and gynaecology in Perth. He has worked at Liverpool Hospital, and has a keen interest in community and public health and played a role in the Ebola National Summit.*

*Guest Contributor: Stella Nwosu is a registered nurse/midwife at Westmead Hospital, and a Child and Family Health Nurse at Doonside Community Health Centre. She is a bilingual health educator at NSW Health on Female Genital Mutilation.*

*‘The Health Diary of a Community’ was produced with assistance from the [Western Sydney Migrant Resource Centre](#).*

### Summary of the forum

Attendees included doctors, academics, health and counselling professionals, advocacy organisations, and African-Australian community members from NSW, VIC, WA and Queensland. In total 21 attended the 1.5-hour webinar.

The purpose of the forum was to hear and share personal stories and experiences, and to understand any strategic needs from community leaders on which to build programs.

The topics raised were varied and poignant. For some in the community who are experiencing hardship – even during normal times – there are challenges to finding health providers that can be trusted, and information that is safe.

## Key concerns raised

- There was a strong sense that the African Australian community is **stronger through unity**, but that one of the impacts of COVID-19 was a fracturing of togetherness.
- African communities are **fuelled by connection and family**. As this is taken away, how is the community coping with finding alternate ways to maintain connection? Mental health and well-being is suffering, putting strain on domestic and relationship health. How can the African-Australian community access the right supports to safely fill gaps? Is it clear and do we know best how to support and provide positivity and new sense of stability? How do we best support the community to build a positive approach towards the uncertainty and fractured sense of stability COVID-19 has placed on our society.
- How will African Australians be prepared if a **second wave** comes? What workplace and community protections are in place? Are both public and private systems supported adequately?
- **Data drives policy** – but what targeted and trusted data do we have? If an African-Australian community member gets coronavirus, how will we know? Is the education and clear pathway toward sharing in place?
- **Communication breakdown**: no real solution-finding, messaging or advice specific to African Australians. There is a gap between health and government professionals and community leaders at the grass roots level.
- There is a certain importance in African Australians **recognising themselves as messengers, influencers** and trusted representatives. However, there is a significant lack of a ‘voice of the youth.’
- Mental health is a form of **silent deterioration**, and we must look out for this in the community.

## Testimonials

*“Africans are communal people; we like to support one another. We love our solidarity. We believe that unity is power. We miss each other, that gathering. And with that communication breakdown – how do we reach those who are isolated?”* **Stella**

*“How are we prepared for a second wave? That [African Australians] are resilient at this stage – it’s not actually defined. The disconnect between professionals and the community leaders is so wide. What plans are in place to connect ethnic, regional leaders that will bring this message to the grassroots?”* **Victor**

*“We have to normalise and validate that [African Australians] are going through this as well. A big problem in the community is the stigma around health, especially mental health. Because of this stigma and misinformation that goes around, it’s up to us to try and correct that right there and then.” **Winnie***

*“We don’t know if data is being collected on [African Australians] – without knowing anything, people just talk about the ‘African community’. What is the African community? Who are they? Does anyone know if data is collected – are there 300 infected? One [infected]? Data is important – data moves policy. **Guido***

*“In the end we are all black and African – what happens to one of us will happen to all of us. If we give attention to the data, we can say to our MPs, ‘Here, this is our data and our community.’” **Guido***

*“I come from a family of doctors. I’ve been in Australia 10 years. I worry about going to the doctor – it’s taken me five years before I could find a doctor I trusted, and eight years to find someone I knew I could trust. Someone who could say ‘It’s okay you don’t need that medication.’ So my challenge here is feeling safe.” **Denise***

*“In the US there have been black and brown physicians going out and doing the testing in their communities, because those are the people we can trust. That’s how you lead the way.” **Denise***

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There is a need for an organisation like Africa Health Australia to start building and nurturing these networks and to provide a greater wealth of resources and guidelines for the community to feel supported. The African Australian community and its leaders are often united despite distancing measures, however there has been a lack of targeted data, support and communication from the myriad government responses.

AHA recommends that the community and its leaders can be part of a co-design process that builds the community and health professional network, and the training and preventative care initiatives to support the African Australian community through the COVID-19 period. There is a specific need to coalesce key advocacy positions for community health and well-being, and to enable African Australians to take control of prevention and health decisions.

For more information on Africa Health Australia, visit [www.africahealthaustralia.com.au](http://www.africahealthaustralia.com.au) or the AHA [Facebook page](#).

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