



Policy brief #1

Corka bubs, deadly mums and strong families: connecting pregnant women with support for stress, yarndi and alcohol

This policy brief summarises key findings of the Corka Bubs study led by the Aboriginal Communities and Families Health Research Alliance at the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute. The study assessed feasibility and acceptability of a co-designed care package providing accessible pathways to support services for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander pregnant women and their support people.

There is consistent evidence that persistent social stressors are detrimental to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and that social health issues are not adequately addressed by existing service models during pregnancy. In South Australia, the Aboriginal Families Study has identified the need to strengthen the capacity of antenatal care services to support women and families experiencing a range of social health issues, including drug and alcohol problems, family violence, housing insecurity, legal problems and impacts on wellbeing.

Over the past 15 – 20 years, maternity hospitals in Adelaide and some regional areas have sought to embed culturally safe approaches to clinical care of Aboriginal women and families, including the integration of Aboriginal Maternal Infant Care practitioners into some service settings. The Corka Bubs study builds on these foundations to address the need for additional support addressing social determinants of health to be co-located and integrated within antenatal care. Importantly, the Corka Bubs study also builds on the resilience of Aboriginal women and families by seeking to foster their strengths and resources.

What is the Corka Bubs Study?

The Corka Bubs, Deadly Mums and Strong Families Study (Corka Bubs) aimed to determine the feasibility and acceptability of a care package for pregnant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experiencing stress or problems with use of alcohol or cannabis during pregnancy. The care package was co-designed with Aboriginal communities and staff from participating health and social care services.

The care package was a suite of additional services – embedded within antenatal care – designed to empower Aboriginal women and their support people by helping to reduce harms associated with common social health issues. Additional supports included: access to a counsellor; support to reduce harms of cannabis and alcohol use; and support to address family legal issues. These services were available to women and their support people attending the Aboriginal birthing programs at two Adelaide hospitals. The project aimed to provide practical support for families in the antenatal and early postnatal period and improve linkages and referrals between antenatal care services and key social support services.



About the care package

- The care package included: access to a counsellor, support from staff of the Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Support Services and support from staff of the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement. In most instances these three support services were offered on the same day.
- Aboriginal women were eligible to participate if they were enrolled at the Women's and Children's Hospital Ngangkita Ngartu service (Aboriginal Family Birthing Program) or at the Lyell McEwin Hospital (Northern Aboriginal Birthing Program).
- Services provided through Corka Bubs were co-located within the Ngangkita Ngartu service and at Muna Paiendi Aboriginal primary care service and were offered at no cost to women and their support people.
- Corka Bubs appointments were offered on a flexible basis, often on the same day as routine antenatal care appointments. Transport to get to appointments was provided if needed.
- Women were invited to complete a modified version of 'The Grog Survey App' at their first Corka Bubs appointment. This App is designed to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a culturally safe way to report on their drinking and get tailored feedback (a brief intervention) to help them reflect on their alcohol use.
- The App was used as an engagement tool, and was modified to include questions about cannabis use. These questions were co-designed with input from Aboriginal community members and study investigators at the beginning of the study.





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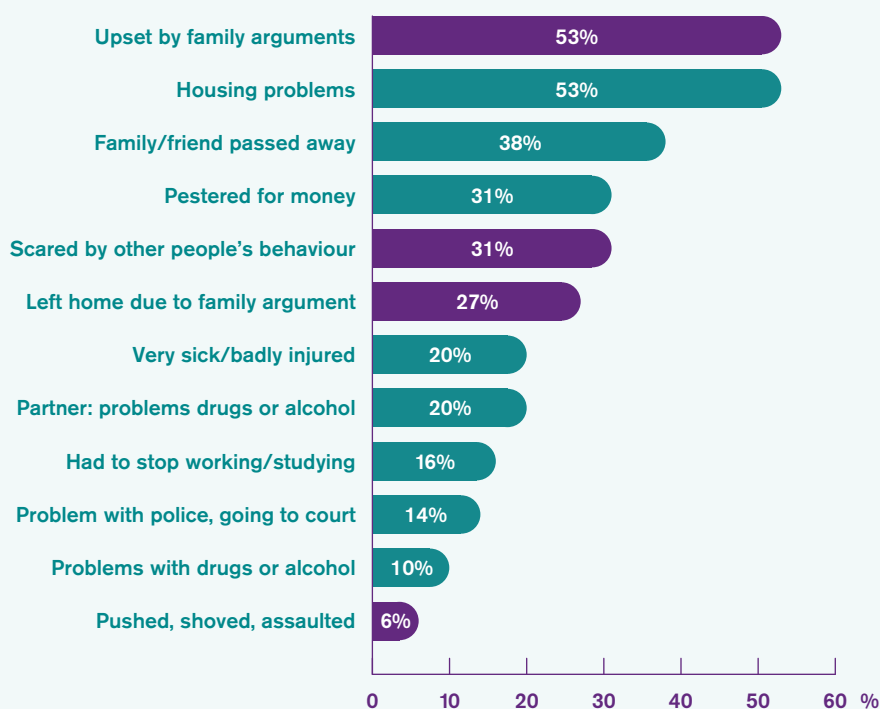
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Social health issues

All women taking part were asked about stressful events and social health issues that may have been impacting their health and wellbeing during pregnancy. The most common social health issues experienced by women participating in Corka Bubs were: being upset by family arguments (53%), housing problems (53%), family member or friend passing away (38%), being pestered for money (31%), being scared by other people's behaviour (31%) and leaving home due to a family argument (27%) (see Figure 1).

Over half of women (56%) experienced three or more of these issues during their pregnancy.

Figure 1: Social health issues experienced by women during pregnancy



Uptake of the care package by women and their support people

Fifty-two women enrolled in the study and of these, 49 completed the initial Corka Bubs appointment. These women were typically in the second or third trimester of pregnancy.

Approximately 4 out of 5 participants accessed at least one Corka Bubs service. On average, women attended four support service appointments, with the total number of appointments per participant ranging from one to 13 appointments. In total, participants who attended the first Corka Bubs appointment attended 187 support service appointments.



Approximately 4 out of 5 participants accessed at least one Corka Bubs service



On average 4 appointments utilised per participant



187 support service appointments accessed

Corka Bubs services were also offered to women's nominated partner or support person. However, many women attended appointments alone. This may have been influenced by both the timing of appointments and the continuing impact of hospital restrictions

imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, six support people enrolled in the Corka Bubs program and five accessed services offered as part of the care package. Counselling was the service most often accessed by support people.



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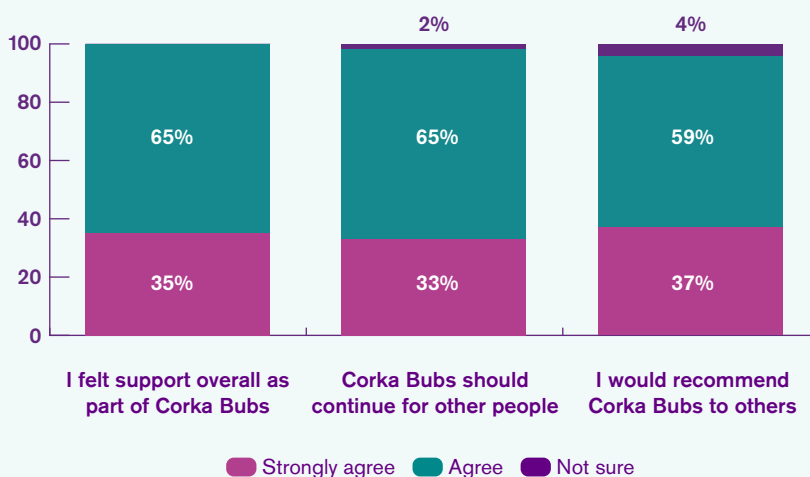
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Acceptability of the care package

In the weeks prior to giving birth, participants were interviewed and asked to provide feedback about Corka Bubs services and research processes. Almost all participants felt well supported by the program and would recommend the Corka Bubs program to other Aboriginal women. Participants also strongly supported continuation of the Corka Bubs program (Figure 2).

No participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with these statements.

Figure 2: Feedback from participants



What women said about Corka Bubs

Women's comments about the Corka Bubs program indicated that they valued the culturally safe space to access support and the non-judgemental approach of service providers. Women whose partner or support person had accessed services also appreciated this aspect of the care package.

Asked what they liked the most, women said:

'All of it. It was a safe space where I could talk about the problems I was having.'

'Was good that my partner could also use the counsellor, can get a phone appointment if needed and can access after baby is born.'

'The overall support, you feel [culturally..] safe, no judgement.'

What staff said about Corka Bubs

The Corka Bubs program was well received by antenatal care staff and external service providers. All agreed that the program was culturally safe, supportive and non-judgemental of women and their partners/support people.

There was broad support for the care package to be integrated into routine service delivery, and for care to be extended to partners and support people who wished to participate.

Asked whether Corka Bubs was useful and helpful for participants, staff said:

'Yes, as a midwife [I] saw big improvements in women's confidence, engagement in antenatal care, confidence in speaking up for themselves and their babies.'

'Yes. Very useful in that it was an Aboriginal service that made women feel more comfortable to talk about their issues. Your service is unique and valued by women.'

'Yes, very useful. It gave Aboriginal mums alcohol and other drug counselling and support in a culturally sensitive and safe environment within the hospital that they were to birth, which gave them more confidence that they were supported with their history of AOD use and supported in a non-stigmatised way.'



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Implications for policy and practice

- The formative evaluation of the co-design and implementation of the Corka Bubs care package into antenatal care services in two regions of Adelaide demonstrates that embedding a package of additional services addressing social determinants of health into existing maternity services is feasible and highly acceptable to Aboriginal women.
- Aboriginal women particularly valued having a range of services available in the one place. They also valued the flexibility to access the specific services they needed at a time and in a place that worked for them.
- Participants and staff indicated the package offered cultural safety. Women appreciated a judgement-free environment, support from Aboriginal staff, and shared Aboriginal experiences that fostered comfort and acceptability.
- The findings demonstrate the importance of maternity services being connected with other social and community services to facilitate holistic care that meets the health, wellbeing and social needs of women and families during pregnancy.
- The high prevalence of social health issues experienced by participants in the Corka Bubs program is testament to the need for holistic approaches to antenatal care that integrate social support for families with high quality clinical care.

- Maternity services and Corka Bubs service providers strongly supported continuing the program. They noted the importance of having consistent hospital space to offer the program, executive support and formal partnerships between hospitals and community-based services. They also noted the potential need for additional funding to embed the care package within existing service delivery frameworks.

In summary, the findings of our formative evaluation of the Corka Bubs care package demonstrate the feasibility and acceptability of embedding enhanced, culturally safe services within Aboriginal birthing programs to address social determinants of health and wellbeing for Aboriginal women, children and families.

There is an urgent need for hospitals and community services to work together to act on the findings and ensure better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers and babies.



[strongerfutures.org.au/
corka-bubs](https://strongerfutures.org.au/corka-bubs)

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