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### **Australian Medicine in Indigenous Societies**

The Indigenous peoples of Australia are plentiful and widespread within the nation. They are split up into many tribes, with many different languages and beliefs. In a count in June of 2016 there were nearly 800,000 Indigenous peoples within Australia, distributed through the many states of the nation. The largest populations of Indigenous peoples in Australia are in the states of Queensland (Northeast Australia) and New South Wales (Eastern Australia). The territory or state with the largest percentage of Indigenous peoples is the Northern territory, with around thirty percent of the people being Indigenous. Now these peoples are not one tribe, they are many tribes of people with their own ways of life and knowledge. With this knowledge there is also medicinal knowledge and their own ways of using these medicines and practices for treating disease and illnesses. These medicines and practices can be overlooked in communities and societies that are non-indigenous. These practices may not be able to treat certain medical dilemmas, but they can be used to help. The Indigenous peoples of Australia have medicine and health treatments that can be and have been extremely beneficial towards severe operations or illnesses, like cancer for example. These types of medicines have not been given enough attention and research within Australia and the wider world, and the possible uses they have. The knowledge these many tribes in Australia have has benefitted said people and could be incorporated into general or traditional medicine. There are many statistics that can show the benefits of these medicines and treatments.

Before we go into the actual medicine and treatments of the many Indigenous tribes of Australia and the specific states they inhabit, and the types of ways that they use their medicines, it is important that we go over who these people are and how they live. Some of the tribes of the country are the Koori that are located in New South Wales, or the Murri located in parts of the Queensland state or the northern part of New South Wales. These tribes could be described as large groups of Indigenous peoples or communities. To move on to how these people think is important, because how they gather and share knowledge can be intertwined with how they practice certain treatments in regards to medicine. The way these Indigenous peoples think is not so different from the rest of the world which is hard for others to accept (Muller, 69). The idea of colonization is still alive in society (Muller, 16), even though there have been many efforts towards decolonization, it is still there. Through the process of decolonization, history is recontextualized to show the "strength, resilience and adaptation" (Muller, 54) that these tribes and groups of Indigenous peoples went through. With history of these Indigenous peoples and tribes being looked in a new light, the way they were treated, but also the types of medicine and treatments that are practiced. As decolonization becomes more prominent it is possible to see the types of medicine used by these tribes of people could possibly be more prominently used outside of these tribes and their communities.

Australia was colonized by the British in the late 18th century and with that many of the customs and cultures were brought from England to Australia. The similarities between the country that colonized and the one that was colonized can be seen today, and that can also be the case with medicine and medical treatments. The Indigenous tribes and peoples of Australia can be considered to be more complex. There are many tribes, and where they originate from can be up for discussion. There seems to be a general consensus that most of them came from southeast

Asia and the islands below it. a significant difference that. Could be seen from Indigenous tribes and the people descended from colonizers is how connected they are. In a book on Australian Indigenous peoples there is a description that all indigenous peoples are connected in some way (Muller, 140), this does not necessarily mean they all know each other, or that each tribe is the same, but that there is some form of respect and knowledge shared among these many types of Indigenous tribes. That connectedness will not necessarily be seen outside of these tribes and their communities. This extends to medicine and knowledge of medicine, it is passed down from generation to generation, and is a traditional medicine. Many medicines that can be considered traditional, or alternative and contemporary are practices that came from these tribes and the knowledge that they have gathered over centuries. This could be the case with Indigenous peoples all over the world, all with their own specific ways of dealing with medicine and treatment of diseases.

Like many Indigenous peoples and tribes across the world they have certain customs and ways of life that would be considered to not be normal, and the medicinal practices are an example of that. The types of medicines and treatments that these tribes use would mostly fall under the terms traditional or alternative medicine. Traditional medicine being passed down from many generations, focusing on a specific area. Alternative would be more about the whole body and how it can help a person. There are many types of medicines that these tribes may use, like the Northern Kaanju traditional medicine, a plant species called *Dodonaea Pollyanna* (Simpson) that is used for its anti-inflammatory properties. The species of plant has a restricted distribution, mostly in the Cape York Peninsula (Simpson). This plant species has not been studied in Western society for the possible uses that it can have to deal with tooth pains. The knowledge of this plant species would have been passed down within the Northern Kaanju community and

knowledge of how it can help alleviate tooth pains. This is not to say that the knowledge these specific tribes have are more valuable than modern medicinal practices, but that there is value in knowing them, and that in some cases they can be better than treatments used outside of these communities. There was a study in 2015 that showed that around nineteen percent of Indigenous Australians use traditional or alternative medicines to help alongside their cancer treatments (Adams). This is important due to the high mortality rate of cancer in these Indigenous communities. These treatments are not used as actual cancer treatment, but moreover for things like relaxation or something of the sort.

The medical treatments used by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia are not necessarily different but how often they are used. There are certain things used by certain tribes of people that are used almost exclusively by them. The *Dodonaea polyandra* plant species used in Northern Kaanju medicine (Simpson) used for tooth pain, has not been studied often and the distribution is limited to certain parts of Australia only. The thing to look at is the type of medicines used by these peoples and what they do. It has been shown in studies that many Indigenous cancer patients in Australia will seek out traditional and alternative medicine alongside their cancer treatments. Indigenous Australian women who have gynecological cancer will often seek out these treatments to help deal with the cancer treatment (Gall). These treatments are often associated with things like the mind and how to make the patients more relaxed and at peace. They help with mental states of the patient immensely. Non-Indigenous peoples do not use these types of practices nearly as often, at least in Australia. Not to say that they will not help with the patient's mental state, but these practices aim to do that exactly. We see how the medicines being used outside of non-Indigenous communities can be confusing for these Indigenous peoples (Swain) at times as well. There are treatments used for purely medical

purposes but there are also many spiritual practices that help with the mental state of people going through things like cancer.

To go into a deeper dive of the types of medicines used by these Indigenous Australians and the ways they are used, I wish to focus on cancer patients. The percentage of Indigenous Australians who get cancer and the rate of mortality they face is higher than non-Indigenous Australians, this includes the five-year survival rate (Adams). The report, done in the years 2004-2008 (Adams), also states that fifty percent of Indigenous Australians are likely to die in the first year. Around nineteen percent of these Indigenous Australians are said to use traditional or alternative medicine when undergoing cancer treatment (Adams). This field in Australia is not studied very much, as opposed to many other countries in the world. The people who took part in the study reported the type of cancer they had, with breast cancer having twenty four percent of the participants, this is not surprising considering there were more women than men. Of the 248 participants, 47 went to alternative medicine which included traditional Indigenous medicine or clinics that provide that (Adams). While this is not a staggering number it shows that there are those who use, and there can be benefits to this. In a report about gynecological cancer patients, it was reported that Eighty six percent participated in traditional and contemporary or alternative medicine (Gall). A Queensland report stated how of 18 women who came in, fourteen percent used traditional Indigenous therapy. Now, the mortality rate for cancer among Indigenous Australians is still higher than non-Indigenous Australians, but these traditional medicines are not used to treat but to help with the mental state of the people who use them.

The conflict that may come with these different types of medicines is the barriers between the peoples who use them. The medical treatments used by Indigenous peoples are not looked at or seen as viable often. As seen in the study on *Dodonaea polyandra*, there had been no

study that had been previously published (Simpson), showing how there was lack of study on the benefits the plant could have for medical purposes. The lack of exposure for these kinds of medical treatments makes it so that non-Indigenous communities will not see how these medical practices can be used to their benefit. On the side of these Indigenous tribes is how it makes it hard for them to live their life in the manner they wish. Cancer is more prominent for these tribes, and one of the highest causes of mortality for them. To get the proper treatment and care, they would need to go to urban areas, and sometimes, in the case of renal transplantation they need to relocate just to have that available to them (Majoni). Continuing with the barriers between the groups of peoples, an example of this could be the strained relationships between the HMR, the Home Medicine Review, and Aboriginal peoples, as well as the Torres Strait Islanders (Swain). The HMR reviews medicines and how to deliver them to patients to help them with whatever medical problem that they may have. There has been a lack of this in these Indigenous communities, including the Torres Strait Islanders. The problems seem to be that the two groups do not communicate well, so the HMR does not offer many reviews for these groups of peoples, and so there is limited help. This could be put the other way too, with Indigenous communities not willing to share their knowledge, especially considering the past colonization history. If there is contention with sharing knowledge and help, then knowledge will not be shared causing a lack of people knowing what these tribes can offer with treatments, and then also making it so these tribes do not have much connection with modern medicinal practices. We see how Indigenous peoples using traditional and alternative medicines alongside their cancer treatment have trouble sharing with their doctors how they use these medical practices (Gall).

These medicinal treatments can be brought into and integrated into the many different societies and medical practices that are regular around the world. We see how certain plants like

the *Dodonaea polyandra* used by the Northern Kaanju can be used in relation to tooth pains and aches and how it can benefit western society (Simpson). This plant could be incorporated into dental procedures, or toothpaste for those who have to deal with tooth pain. How much the plant could be distributed even in Australia may not make it possible for it to be widespread. We already see how often things like traditional medicine and alternative medicine are used for Indigenous peoples of Australia to help deal with their cancer treatment (Adams). That shows how Indigenous people use medicine that may be similar or within their own communities along with modern medicine. What needs to happen first is for these types of treatments and medicine within these tribes to study and see how they can be used positively for medical treatments. These studies can be incorporated into modern medicines. In the study of *Dodonaea polyandra* it was stated how there was no previous study published that showed how the plant species could be used (Simpson), yet the study showed how this plant species could be used in a positive way. On the other hand, it is necessary to make non-indigenous medicine available for these tribes where they do not need to relocate to get treatment, like renal transplantation in the Northern territory of Australia (Majoni). By making the medicines on both sides widely available and in many communities, both types of medicines can be integrated together. Not to replace each other, just to make it so more options of medical treatments are available.

So, moving forward with the two types of medicines, how they go about it is important. It starts with the decolonization process that has been happening, which must continue and be spread out to things like the medical field. We have seen how certain things have not been studied, like the *Dodonaea polyandra* plant species which can help with tooth pains and aches (Simpson), the problem being the lack of studies of how it can be used and the benefits that it provides. With the decolonization process being pushed forward, putting the history into a new

light and showing how the Indigenous peoples and tribes of Australia showed their strength and adaptability (Muller, 54), we can show how the knowledges of these peoples in any aspect of life, but especially medically can benefit society as a whole but, this needs to be a give and take relationship of knowledge and resources. Cancer being a very prominent cause of mortality among Indigenous peoples in Australia, it needs to be so that these peoples can get the care they need without having to relocate to urban areas. Another thing that could be used to help meld these practices together is the introduction of traditional Indigenous medicines along with alternative medicines to the general Australian public. Studies have shown how there are many Indigenous Australians who use these types of medical practices alongside with the treatment for their types of cancer. If more people use these types of treatments, it can not only help them go through the treatment for serious medical treatments for things like cancer, but it can also help make these types of treatments look more favourable. These traditional and alternative medicines are not used to treat the cancer but alongside it (Gall) and that could be a start to introducing these types of treatments, and then going further and looking at tribe specific medical treatments.

The medicines and medical practices used by Indigenous tribes and communities could be extremely beneficial for the people of Australia. Not just the people who are not using these treatments, but also the Indigenous peoples who already use them. If the wider society can see how these treatments like the *Dodonaea polyandra* plant species work, they can then see how best to use them. By knowing this they can provide support to these Indigenous peoples and tribes on how to deal with certain medical problems that they may have trouble dealing with. If Indigenous medical practices within Australia are more well-known it could help lower the mortality rate for things like cancer among these Indigenous peoples. By introducing these tribal medicines and treatments it can help push the knowledge of medical treatments as a whole. The



knowledge passed down has been used for centuries and by breaking the barriers between the Indigenous Australian tribes and the non-Indigenous peoples many more people can have better medical treatments available to them.

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