**SACRED SISTAS PROJECT**

The Sacred Sistas Project began in 2012 with Arimaya Yates, a passionate and dedicated Koorie midwife, committed to improving the sexual and reproductive health experiences of young Aboriginal women in Australia. Arimaya has developed the program to bring together art-based activities and health promotion information, creating a safe space for young women to learn, yarn, share and build confidence within themselves, and trust with healthcare workers and service providers.

The project is co-ordinated and delivered by Kim Sutton, who works in the Wulumperi Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sexual Health Unit at Melbourne Sexual Health Centre (MSHC). For further information, please contact Kim at KSutton@mshc.org.au or 03 9341 6272.

“Over the years I have worked with women and girls at all stages of being and becoming women. I’ve caught hundreds of babies, shared stories of menstruation with traditional Elders, and participated in community celebrations of women’s fertility, and keepers of life and death.

After spending time working in an Aboriginal community-owned and run birth centre, I found that many of my clients and the girls I met had common threads of knowledge missing. Many had not been taught about their bodies, respectful relationships and how to say “No”, and most had a limited awareness of their cycles, fertility and the power of their bodies.

So much of Aboriginal culture teaches through oral and visual ways, and my aim has been to bridge the arts and storytelling with concepts of women’s sexual and reproductive health. By creating an opportunity for young women to share stories and learn about sensitive women’s business in a safe and creative environment, the Sacred Sistas Project promotes the importance of keeping our bodies, wombs and relationships healthy, and gives young women strategies to do this.

In my lifetime, I’d like to see healthier, happier and more body-aware girls and women who can celebrate their ability to enjoy sex, create families and change each cycle like the months of the year. I hope the project brings both you and your community some positive outcomes and fun while doing it!”

-Arimaya Yates
Koorie Midwife and Creator of the Sacred Sistas Project
PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Sacred Sistas Project is an arts-based sexual and reproductive health promotion program for young Aboriginal women and girls aged 12-30 years in Victoria, Australia. The project includes workshops for young women and healthcare workers, giving young women access to sexual and reproductive health education; in addition to providing health workers and with the skills to promote sexual and reproductive health within their communities. This includes ongoing support from the Wulumperi Unit team.

Aims

The aim of Sacred Sistas is to educate women about reproductive and sexual healthcare, bringing about an awareness of their own bodies, fertility and cycles through the use of crafts and story telling. The program provides a regular, safe space for women to be able to express their needs, concerns and/or experiences in and around sexual and reproductive health. This includes the availability of health professionals to educate and support women through getting to know their bodies, and the importance of their sexual and reproductive health. More specifically, the project aims to:

- Increase women’s awareness of their bodies, sexuality and sexual and reproductive health needs.
- Promote contraceptive options and empowerment of fertility.
- Normalise STI screening, and achieve an improvement in STI screening rates within the community.
- Work with, and train healthcare workers and health service providers in the delivery of an arts-based health promotion project for long-term sustainability with a community driven focus.

Creating while learning

While participants create through specifically designed activities, discussion is opened up around a number of sexual and reproductive health based topics, inviting women to participate in a safe space that allows expression, information-sharing and the ability to seek professional advice and support.

Topics are presented and discussed with an age-appropriate focus, and the session can be tailored to suit each community’s specific needs. Both healthcare providers and participating women are educated on these topics and how to use the creative arts for expressing aspects of women’s health and wellbeing.

Topics can include:
- Puberty and menarche
- Menstrual cycle
- Ovulation and fertility
- Pregnancy and conception
- Safe sex
- Contraception
- Body awareness
- STIs & BBVs
- STI & BBV screening
- Pap testing
- HPV vaccination
ACTIVITIES

There are two main activities that form the basis of the Sacred Sistas Project: beaded cycle bracelets and clay womb bowls. The activities are considered special women’s business and confidentiality is maintained in this space.

CYCLE BRACELETS

Beaded cycle bracelets focus on the different stages of a woman’s cycle using a 28 day cycle: menstruation, fertile period including ovulation, follicular and luteal phases.

When beading, we can yarn about puberty, menarche, menstruation, fertility, contraception, empowerment of women’s bodies, hormones and feelings. This is a time to tell stories and learn together. While the facilitator will cover a number of topics relating to the menstrual cycle, discussion will also include explaining different contraception methods available, safe sex, sexually transmissible infections (STIs), blood-borne viruses (BBVs) and any other topics that the women themselves raise. This may include discussion of Poly cystic ovaries (PCO) and poly cystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), endometriosis, pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility, etc.

WOMB BOWLS

Womb bowls are individually made clay bowls that represent a woman’s womb. The activity allows young women to focus on the sacredness of their wombs, and discussion can focus on keeping that space, and their vaginas (passage to the womb) healthy from STIs, for both happy and healthy living, and future pregnancies. This is a personal activity where girls have the freedom to express themselves creatively in both the sculpting of the bowl, and its decoration.

When bowls are dry they can be used as a safe place to keep objects of special importance, or to symbolise special phases in a particular woman’s cycle. She may wish to put
something special in there when she is ovulating, or menstruating, or at the end of either phase. It may even be a special place to hold sanitary products, or condoms if so desired. While creating and painting the bowls, we yarn about being women and identifying as women, our bodies, wombs, fertility, sexuality, etc. During this activity the topics are more fluid but continue on from the previous activity where the women and girls lead through questions.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

The Sacred Sistas Project Training Workshop can be structured in a number of different ways to suit the specific setting, health workers and time available.

An example structure of approximate times for a ‘train the trainer’ session:

- 10 mins Welcome and introductions
- 10 mins Project background
- 30 mins Quiz
- Break
- 60 mins Beaded cycle bracelets activity
- Break
- 30 mins Confidentiality, listening and facilitating
- 60-75 mins Clay womb bowls activity & scenarios

This program is flexible and depending on start time can include lunch.

*These sessions are structured to fit the needs of the hosting organisation. There is flexibility in the structure, please contact Kim to discuss further: KSutton@mshc.org.au or 03 9341 6272

CONFIDENTIALITY

The Sacred Sistas project aims to create an environment where women can build trust and develop relationships with healthcare professionals in order to feel safe, and to be able to ask questions and seek support. Given the very intimate and private nature of the topics discussed during the activities, the facilitator will remain impartial at all times, and be sensitive to information disclosed in this space. Confidentiality is assured.
INFORMATION PACKS

Each health worker is given a pack of ‘goodies’, of which the contents is explained at different times during the session. Packs include the following:

- Sacred Sistas workbook
- Sexually Transmissible Infections booklet (VACCHO)
- Quick Guide to Contraception (VACCHO & FPV)
- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre wallet resource cards (specific to each region)
- Test Me, Let Them Know, Better to Know & Check Your Risk business cards
- Sacred Sistas facilitator contact details.
- National STI Prevention Program: Sexual Health Campaign resource kit
- Sacred Sistas brochure
- Female condom
- Dental dam

EVALUATION & PHOTOGRAPHIC CONSENT

Evaluation is an important component of the Sacred Sistas Project. Health workers are given a survey at the beginning of the session and are asked to complete the first page prior to commencement. This includes a photographic consent section which allows workers to select if they give or do not give consent to have their photograph taken.

Following the workshop workers complete the second page and return their survey to the facilitator. The information is used by the Wulumperi Unit at Melbourne Sexual Health Centre solely for the purpose of improving the project. The survey is optional.