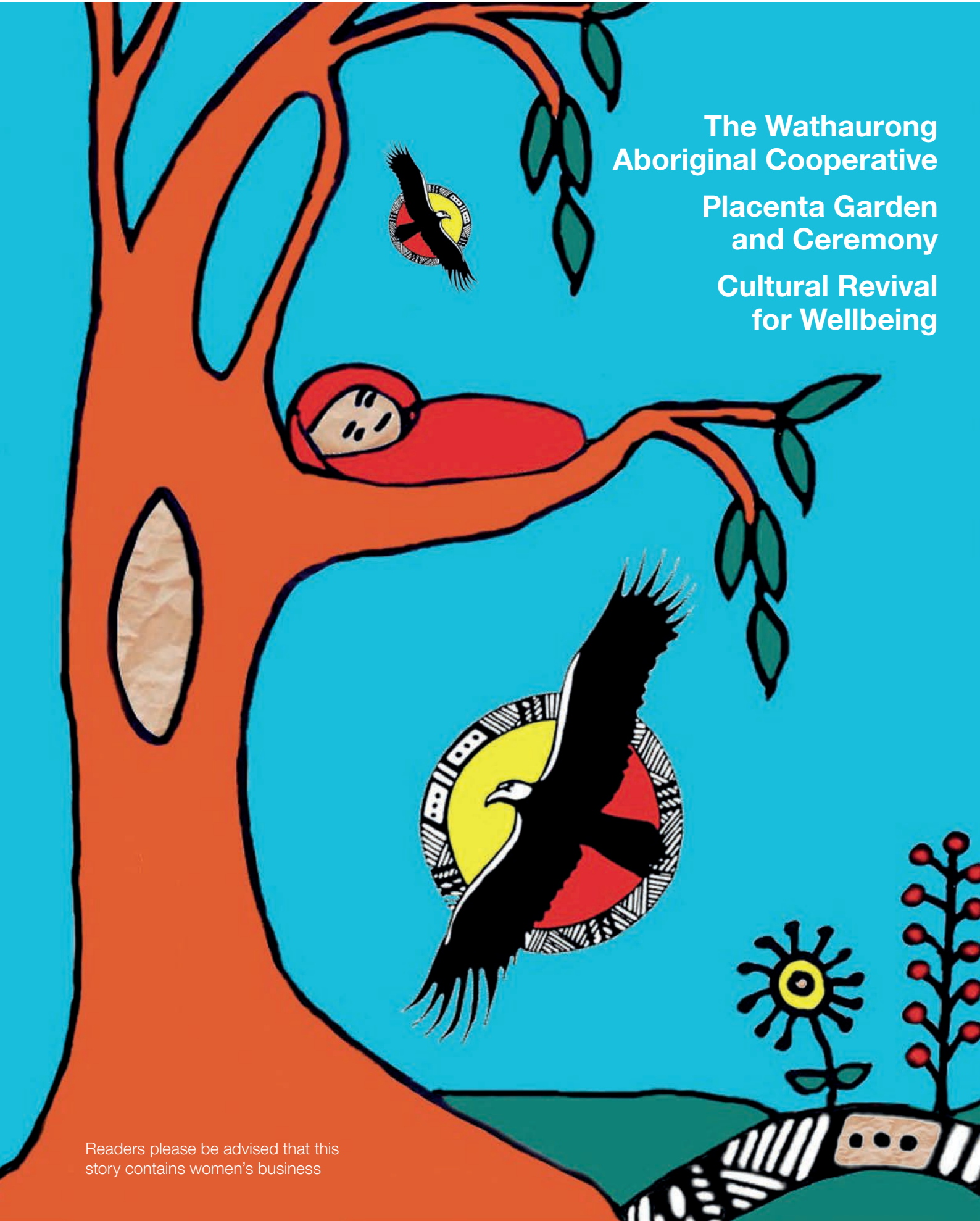




The Wathaurong
Aboriginal Cooperative
Placenta Garden
and Ceremony
Cultural Revival
for Wellbeing



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Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative
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Front cover artwork is a digitization of an original drawing
created by Kerrie Black

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Foreword

The placenta is a beautiful organ. It is responsible for growing a healthy baby. It is the bridge between a mother and her baby in the womb, it is unique, amazing and beautiful.

By burying the placenta it's like giving back to mother earth to let her know that a child has been born, so that mother earth can continue to nurture that Boorai, in particular the spiritual soul of that little person.

When I had my two Boorai's I was not given the option of having my placentas nor did I have a garden to bury them and this makes me feel very sad. I believe all women should have that offered to them.

When I had an opportunity to work at the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative for a short time the Koorie Maternity Service's team showed me their plans for a Placenta Garden and all the placenta's that they had stored in the clinical fridge. I felt very happy and impressed with what they had planned. It is fantastic that they now have their placenta garden. The team at the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative is very inspirational and I am so excited by this fantastic project.

This type of project is something all Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation's and Hospitals should look at taking on board. We have a rich, vibrant Victorian Aboriginal culture, or cultures, in this State and keeping our culture strong is vital for the health and wellbeing of our people.

Jill Gallagher

CEO

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

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Introduction

Pictured above is artwork from the Wathaurong Women's Group

For millennia, Victorian Aboriginal women have been practicing ceremony and ritual to ensure wellbeing. This report tells the story of this continuing practice through the revival of a placenta garden and ceremony initiated by the Koorie Maternity Service at the Wathaurong Aboriginal Health Service. Discussed here is the inspiration behind the revival, the process used to revive practice, how the practice has been implemented and outcomes the program has had. The Aboriginal Health Worker and Midwife who initiated the program tell the story. Firstly, some background and context is provided to set the scene.



Background and context

The Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative

The Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative is located in Geelong in South East Australia. The primary purpose of the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative is to provide holistic and culturally secure service responses to meet the specific needs of the Aboriginal community. It's overall objective is to provide Aboriginal people living or in transit in the service delivery area with increased and improved access to a range of culturally appropriate health, housing, education, employment and cultural services, contribute to improvements in community well being and build the capacity of the community to control its own affairs and achieve self-determination.

“ We are here to support and politically advocate for the community: to provide culturally appropriate health, education, aged, disability, housing and cultural services, provide and advocate for sustainable employment for Aboriginal people in ways that are consistent with Aboriginal cultural practices. ”

The Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative's approach to meeting the needs of the local Aboriginal community is by providing culturally appropriate, quality services and programs which promote sustainable economic growth, political stability, health and well-being and environmental care that is respectful of Aboriginal culture. The Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative aims to function in a way that enables Aboriginal people to build and strengthen the social, cultural, economic, environmental and spiritual foundations of the local Aboriginal community. It also advocates for community on issues, which affect local Aboriginal peoples', lives and operates in a way that ensures the rights are upheld. It works toward broader collaboration and maintains partnerships with external stakeholders to ensure informed policy, program directions and service access and responsiveness. The Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative represents local Aboriginal community needs and interests in all its dealings; this is the pure essence of community control.

Pictured left is a painted pave stone from the placenta garden

Koorie Maternity Service

As part of the Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative health programs a Koorie Maternity Services (KMS) is provided. The (KMS) program began in Victoria in 2000 and was developed through a partnership between the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and the Victorian Government. In 2007 The Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative was funded to provide such a service for the Geelong region.

The KMS aims to improve access to culturally appropriate maternity care for women. It offers flexible, non-judgmental care via relationships built between families with KMS midwives and Aboriginal Health Workers. An objective is to increase access to and participation in antenatal and postnatal support. A second objective is to facilitate relationships between women and birthing hospitals (Victorian Government, 2015).

Cultural Revival and Wellbeing

The process of Australia's colonization was particularly brutal in South East Australia. It has been estimated that from a population of 200,000 Aboriginal people in Victoria by the late 18th century approximately 5,000 people had survived the introduced disease and prolific massacres. Processes such as assimilation, family separation and early mortality further eroded cultural knowledge and practice (Koorie Heritage Trust, 1991). Despite this extraordinary level of interference Koorie people have staunchly and optimistically maintained and revived cultural knowledge and practice (Pascoe, 2007). A good example of this is the revival of Possum Skin Cloak making. Once a common item every Aboriginal person possessed for many years none were created. In recent years there has been a significant revival in cloak making requiring considered thinking about how the original practice of making these occurred.



Making possum skin cloaks has provided inspiration for my artistic practice. I am deeply moved by the process of creating them as I consider making cloaks to be an act of reclaiming my heritage. It is particularly important as Aboriginal people were prevented from practicing their culture and for me, making these cloaks is an act of living my sovereignty.

Kelly Koumalatsos (Melbourne Museum, 2016)



Approaches to dealing with Indigenous health often omit Indigenous knowledge and focus instead on access to healthcare for the illness and pathology that has arisen from cultural dispossession. This can effectively reduce self-determination of Aboriginal people by imposing a western cultural model that is not inclusive of Indigenous modalities of wellbeing.

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These approaches have been limited in their success because they fail to deal with the root cause of the problem. They remain external to the local culture and therefore community, and in doing so have the capacity to contribute further to a community's sense of dislocation and loss of identity. Featuring prominently here are medical and psychological approaches emphasizing individual sickness and removing the problem from the historical and contemporary experiences of people with cultural dispossession. Revitalisation projects offer an alternative to these extrinsic and externally-imposed projects. They are often established by or with communities. Rather than targeting the symptoms of the illness, revitalisation projects target the cause by attempting to revive community cultures and reconnect people with their lands.

(Pilgrim, Samson, & Pretty, 2009)

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The Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative, Koorie Maternity Service had aspirations to reinvigorate cultural practice for women attending the service. While the service provided a culturally safe place and excellent primary health care for families, the service felt that Aboriginal cultural practices and ceremonies for birth were lacking. To strengthen self-determination the service needed to address the imbalance between western medicine and Indigenous wellbeing practices being provided to the local Aboriginal community. This leadership is part of a global movement in self-determination that aims to include Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in the everyday.

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Sustainable self-determination allows for the creation of observable benchmarks for restoring Indigenous cultural and ecological ecosystems. This model overcomes some of the Western epistemological biases often present in scientific assessments of ecosystems and/or political/legal assessments of indigenous rights, which ultimately discounts cultural values and the needs of local communities. The inclusion of ecological, medicinal, food, and other cultural factors in this model assists Indigenous communities in setting their own standards for restoring sustainable relationships

(Corntassel, 2008)

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This is the story of the journey to revive the cultural practice of placenta burial and Ceremony at the Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative.



The Wathaurong Placenta Garden and Ceremony Story

Reviving the Placenta Garden and Ceremony

When the Koori Maternity Services started here in Geelong we had a small number of births coming through, that's about eight years ago. As part of what we were providing for women and families we wanted to give a sense of culture and identity and belonging for the kids that were born in this community. Particularly because Geelong is well known for having a transient community and having lots of community members that live here, but not necessarily from here, or not traditional owners. In our region there are large numbers of children in out of home care and so we wanted to instill a sense of connection to a community. That's why Mandy (Midwife) and I (Rene, Aboriginal Health Worker) started having discussions about burying placentas.

We didn't know a lot about the practices for burying placentas in this region, all we knew was that it happened. Our information is limited in this region about cultural practices. We know about a birthing cave at Portarlington. We have Uncle Dave a community Elder who is a guru and go to man for anything cultural. But we've lost so much of our language, culture and land. We don't have many Elders in this community. The ones I grew up with are all mostly gone. We wanted to leave a little bit of legacy, a little bit of story that could keep going and be handed down, that people can remember after we are all gone.

Pictured left (From L to R):
Rene Owen – Health Services Manager,
Mandy Miller – Midwife and
Athalie Madden – Midwife



We had been up to Darwin to an Indigenous women's conference in 2008. Some of the Old Auntys the Elders from Gove gave a talk about that if the mother can't birth on country it became even more important for them to bring their placentas home for burial, for that connection to country, community and culture and to grow baby up strong. We thought that sounded really good and when we got back home we spoke to the mums that we had at the time about placenta burial at the Cooperative and they loved the idea. These half a dozen or so women thought that it made sense to them, you know that it anchored their babies to country and community and gave them strength for growth. So we started collecting the placentas with the idea that this was going to happen.

Pictured above:
View from the
Birthing Cave

The Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative here as it stands in Morgan Street is synonymous with the local community, everyone knows where Wathaurong is, Aboriginal mob know where this is. So we felt really strongly that we wanted to have the placentas buried here at the Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative. So we remained staunch and insistent. We were collecting the placentas and putting them into freezers because we knew in our hearts that we would be able to do it eventually. It wasn't just us driving it, it was the mums, because word got around and they kept saying "can you keep my placenta so I can bury it". It was very much driven by the women as well.

There were a few obstacles and a few blockers along the way but we felt really confident that we could get it across the line. We had some really strong personalities opposed to it, mostly men, saying 'that's not our way' or 'that's not how it was done here' or 'that's women's business I don't want to talk about it' which made it hard to get decisions made about setting up the space, and setting up the garden.

Making the Women's Tranquility Garden

So we finally got it across the line and got our space! We named it the Wathaurong Women's Tranquility Garden. The garden space chosen was a part of the existing garden adjacent to the health service. We were really mindful that we wanted to have a really safe and secure area so that no dogs, animals or anything could get to it. The first thing we did was build a high brush fence around the garden with a secure gate.

We wanted to get the garden landscaped so we wrote a letter to Bunnings and a whole team of female workers from Bunnings came out and they dug and they planted and they spent ages in there. It was only women and they just had a ball and have come out a couple of times since to have a look to see if the garden needs replenishing.

The First Ceremony and Celebration

We had the first ceremony on one Saturday morning where we got all the placentas out and we dug a trench in the garden. It was a beautiful day and it was the last time or the second last time a male had entered the garden, to help dig the trench because it's a women's garden no males go in there except for little bubba boys.

At the first ceremony all the mums, the little people, their nanas, aunties and dear friends were invited to attend. All the mums had the names on the placentas that were wrapped in paper. We called each of them forward one at a time and they placed their placentas in the earth, the bubbas all got special certificates. Afterwards we all joined in some morning tea together and had a good old chinwag. By this time we had forty placentas so there were a lot of people there. It was just a really lovely thing to do on a Saturday morning having a whole group of women together sharing stories. That first ceremony was in 2011 and we have just quietly been working away on this ever since.

A Continuing Simple Ceremony

After the first big ceremony, we have since provided the ceremony in close proximity to the birth. If the birth happens during the week, it's done on a Saturday morning or nearest to when the Mum is able to come or the Aunty or Nana. Mandy or the Aboriginal Health Worker or myself come to the ceremony and the women invite who they think should be there. We've had a diversity of cultures at the ceremonies. Some of the women and families come from a diverse range of cultures, for example, Italian, Mauritian, Thai, so we are proud to have different cultures engaged and sharing. Even though the Dads are not involved in the ceremony the Nanans are proud to be involved and proud they have an Aboriginal grand baby.

The weather has never stopped us; it's rained before and after but never during. Never had an umbrella out there, we've never been rained on. It's a pretty simple ceremony that takes about 15 minutes. Before the women get there we prepare the garden and dig a space to place the placenta. The women meet us at Wathaurong, it's usually very discreet because it's only the one placenta so the women come here and generally they'll have their baby with them, another toddler or child and other family members. We have a bit of a chat in the garden, give a bit of history about how the garden came about and we'll say something around our hopes and dreams for this bubba to grow up healthy and strong and welcoming bubba to the community and culture.

CEREMONY WORDS

We usually start off having a yarn about the garden and the Birth Tree in particular and then finish with a few words about our hopes and dreams.

It usually goes something like this:

This is our birth tree, like our lives it is always changing. In autumn the leaves change color, in spring the leaves grow back and in summer the tree flowers. Sometimes in our lives we have difficult times and it can be tough to work through. But like our birth tree each phase is needed to be able to go to the next. In winter the tree looks the worse for wear but without it we wouldn't have the beautiful summer flowers. Our lives are a journey and our experiences make us who we are today. The placenta we are planting today has nourished and grown this beautiful bubba and now it will nourish our birth tree.

We would like to welcome baby to the Wathaurong Community. Our hopes and dreams for baby is to grow up healthy and strong and well connected to Country and Culture.

The mother more often than not will put the placenta in the ground and then we'll cover it over. Sometimes the other kids get involved and help cover the placenta. Mum might say 'you're placenta is in here as well'. We believe that things make sense to little ones, toddlers may not remember the experience but when they grow up it will especially after they hear stories told back to them. I love that the toddlers are involved.

Some people take photos, particularly when the placenta is put in, but generally not many photos are taken. We ask that because as a women's space photos are private and only shared amongst family not on social media and the likes, being mindful and respectful. We keep it as simple and respectful as we can.

We've probably buried over a hundred placentas now. We wrap them in newspaper, they break down very quickly into the earth. There have been a couple of mums who say 'eww', or 'yuk' or 'disgusting' but once we explain that it's just a tranquil area they sort of come around a little bit. We've had a couple of women say 'that's not what they do' or 'that's not we do where my mums from' and that's fine. Some women say 'oh I'd love that but I don't want to see it' or 'will you do it, will you take it?'. They'll come to the ceremony but they don't want to look at the actual placenta, it's all wrapped up in newspaper with their name on it.



Pictured above:
Placenta wrapped in
newspaper



At the hospital when the bubba is born they have a form that the mum is to sign saying that they will dispose of the placenta in a certain way. Our process isn't included on the form so the mum's just sign it, it's another example of our women nodding their heads in agreement so they can just get them out of their hair, nodding in agreement and then just not doing it. The form says how to bury it, how deep etc. Our garden is purpose built so provides a different environment than what the hospital would be used to seeing.

Having said that, the hospital is actually very supportive. When we ask for the placenta at the hospital, we ask the midwife doing the care that day and tell them that we would like to take the placenta home with us. They put it in a little bucket with a label on it and give it to the mum or us. Sometimes they are really intrigued about what we do and why we do it. In the early days there were a lot more questions but now the midwives are used to it. Now a lot of staff say 'do you want to take the placenta' because they know that genuinely we do.

A Tranquil Space for Community

The garden has become quite a tranquil place; it feels special when you walk in there. You know we've got a bird's nest in there. At one ceremony there was a blue tongue lizard sitting up in there on the fence like it was waiting for us. The mum loves blue tongue lizards and has a tattoo of one.

It is a peaceful place. When we've had a couple of heavy mornings at work, we say it's one of those 'go into the women's garden and pull out some weeds kind of days'. There's a bench chair out there and we use it as a bit of a tranquil space. People go out there when they need some time out or need to find some peace. Sometimes we even take clients out there to counsel them, it's secluded and quiet. People know that many placentas are buried in there, it's respectful and people take pride in that.

Respectful Men

We haven't had any trouble with our space with break ins or the like, not that we were expecting that. On one occasion a couple of teenage boys went to go in the gate and we said 'you can't do that, that's a Women's only area' and then they stopped. Even when the beam from the roof fell in the garden and needed to be repaired, the non-Aboriginal men here were very respectful. We had to get a tradie in, the non-Aboriginal finance man tried to get a female tradie but couldn't find one, he tried really hard too!

There are two rooms that overlook the garden space. One is the Midwife's and the other is a consultation room. Ideally we want to get frosted glass on the one in the consultation room but at the moment we just turn the blinds up. We have made all the male staff aware that if they are in that room they should turn the blinds up, they are very respectful and we all feel proud of this.

Creating Connection

When women have had more babies they ask if they can do the placenta burial again. It's nice that we've got siblings in there together. There was one lady who had several children; sadly she has had many of them taken away from her. I remember her saying 'no matter what happens this one will always be connected to Wathaurong' it was sad that she was thinking that way, but there was a small positive in knowing that the baby would always be connected to this community. The little person was taken away but still has a connection here.

Families must talk about the garden because we've had relatives ask, us after they've had a baby they say 'oh my cousins Mary and John their placentas are buried here aren't they'. So there's that family connection as well. Even if families get separated all the placentas are here, Mary and John don't even live in the same house and were separated but their placentas are here together.



“ Having my grandsons placentas planted in the garden has been special to me as my grandchildren they will be grounded here in my Geelong and will learn the importance of the land. They are now connected to the Wathaurong community for life and are the 3rd generation of my family living here, who will grow in the strength of community. My father was a founding member of the co-op so we have strong connections here. The burial was special and informal with Mandy saying a few words, it was something I was included in which I could share with my daughter in-law that was cultural as she is not Indigenous.

Kerrie Black, Grandmother

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We recently had a young girls taster day here learning about working in health. We are trying to encourage young Aboriginal girls to work in the health workforce and so we took them out there to inspire them. We've also had a couple of other small women's groups visit the garden over the years too.

The garden and the ceremony shows an overall respect, appreciation and acceptance for culture. So whilst it may not be for everyone it's their choice but it's an accepted thing because it creates connection for people. There are a large number of kids in out of home care in our region who feel a lack of connection to a community. Everyone needs to feel they belong somewhere and have a sense of identity. We don't want this to get caught up in politics, it's not about individuals, it's about the babies, the families and a simple placenta burial.

Aspirations for the Garden and Ceremony

We would really like the women's group at Wathaurong to take ownership of the garden. We've had a couple of painted pavers put in and we would really like for the women to take carriage of it, weed it and beautify the fence or contribute some art pieces. The whole area is a bit of a work in progress. We've seen lots of beautiful butterflies and birds in the garden. We'd like to make it really special area with comfortable furniture, more native plants, more local artwork and make it a restful place for contemplation.

We'd like to have some little cards made up that have the ceremony reading on it. We can put bubbas name in and the date and give that to the mum as well. After we go we want the story to keep going, we don't want it all to fall down. We have also thought of the KMS providing a Koori birth certificate. Many people have trouble getting confirmation of identity as they get older, this could potentially then be used as proof of Aboriginality. It would be nice to tie it all in.





Placenta Ceremony Outcomes and Wellbeing Evidence

Outcomes of the Placenta Ceremony have included improved: community connection; connection to country and; cultural self-determination in health care practice. Previous research provides supporting evidence that the outcomes of a Placenta Garden and Ceremony promote and improve wellbeing. Below is listed some of this previous research and descriptions of wellbeing gained from outcomes associated with the Placenta Ceremony.

- Social integration (or wide participation in social networks) allows individuals gain a sense of identity, predictability and stability, purpose, meaning, belonging, security and self-worth. It improves immunity and reduces early mortality (Cohen, 2004).
- Connection to country through partnerships and ancestors has a positive effect on wellbeing for Aboriginal people (Kingsley, Townsend, Henderson-Wilson, & Bolam, 2013).
- Connections between people, place and country promote wellbeing for the individual and the collective (Cacioppo et al., 2011; Sternberg, 2008)
- Autonomy (defined as acting in accordance with one's values) is related to wellbeing across cultures (Wichmann, 2011).
- Rites of passage are diverse and often involve promotion of a sense of connection and belonging, acknowledge a life phase, assign a task or challenge and invoke the group with spirit. They are known to enhance community responsibility, strengthen identity and affirm social relationships (Blumenkrantz & Gavazzi, 1993; Moulton, 2012)



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