

Research

Sustaining an interprofessional culture of research and evaluation within a community parenting and early childhood organisation

Abstract

Ngala is an evidence-informed community-based parenting and early childhood organisation in Western Australia. During 2007, a strategic decision was made to forge formal links with universities where researchers could actively participate in the establishment of a research agenda that supported identified priority areas for Ngala. This decision provided strategies for embracing the challenges of evidence-informed practice (EIP) for the organisation alongside competing financial demands which, for many not-for-profit organisations, is an ongoing dilemma.

This paper will discuss the identified trends, changes and examples which informed the foundational components to sustain a research and evaluation culture within an evidence informed community service organisation (CSO). A case study design was used to describe activity and experiences over a decade. Participants included academics from a range of disciplines, and Ngala managers and practitioners. Multiple data sources were analysed – current literature, an audit of organisational documents, and a leadership survey to establish key components necessary to sustain a research culture. Challenges are described as well as examples of success that enabled growth and change.

The sustainability of a culture results in the strength of an organisation to continue building on successes of the past and to focus on the long term. In today's environment of funders requiring organisations to demonstrate the difference they are making for families with children, it is even more crucial for services to build in resources for research and evaluation, despite growing costs. Senior level leadership and commitment enhances the drive for EIP which takes a whole of organisation approach for sustainability.

Keywords research, evaluation, early years, sustainability, interprofessional research, evidence-informed

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Summary of relevance

What is already known about the topic

- Developing a research culture requires commitment and leadership.
- The development of an interprofessional research framework within a community early parenting context assists with the direction of the research agenda.
- Partnerships between researchers and practitioners are pivotal.
- Brings together the culmination of knowledge and perspectives from different disciplines in an area of practice.

What this paper adds

- A description of key elements necessary to sustain a research culture in a community parenting and early childhood organisation.
- Practical strategies to sustain commitment and critical thinking in a parenting service.

Introduction

Ngala is a community service organisation (CSO) providing support and education for parents, families and communities to enhance well-being and the development of children and young people in Western Australia (WA). Over time, Ngala has grown and evolved to meet the needs of parents during pregnancy, families with young children and, since 2016, expanded services to families with children up to 18 years of age. The services are designed to support families through enhancing parenting capacity and parent–child relationships, along with strengthening their community engagement with other support agencies. Parents often contact a parenting service because they need assistance with their children’s sleep, nutrition, behaviour, or with parental adjustment and/or distress during their child’s early years. This assistance varies from receiving information and education, or meeting other parents in a group context, through to more specialised support such as counselling or therapeutic group work to enhance parent–child relationships.¹

Ngala’s research and evaluation agenda has been growing for over a decade. Towards the end of 2007, a research framework was developed in collaboration with practitioners and researchers from key universities which has guided the organisation to the current time.² It is timely to reflect on the requirements for sustainability of the framework to further embed the organisation’s research agenda and culture. Interdisciplinary teamwork has created synergy when solving complex problems and assisted to improve and influence individual and system outcomes, providing a context to achieve new insights to causes and solutions to complexity.³

The purpose of this paper is to analyse five sets of data (archived internal documents; action learning and review cycles; service research and evaluation projects; published papers and conference presentations; and audit of status) against Schwarzman’s⁴ critical factors for influencing and sustaining organisational evaluation research culture (leadership, organisation culture, organisation systems and structures, partnerships, resources, workforce support and

development, recruitment and skills mix) along with data from the *Organisational audit for evidence-informed practice* audit tool⁵ to identify trends and describe changes in organisational research culture in Ngala achieved over the past decade. This paper uses a case study methodology to bring together these multiple sources of data to consider the challenges and examples of practical strategies that have contributed to change. The study focused on three questions to guide its research:

- What are the contributing factors to a successful culture of research and evaluation?
- What are the challenges in sustaining a successful culture?
- What are practical solutions and examples that assist to build an interprofessional culture of research and evaluation?

Context

Ngala is the only state-wide parenting and early childhood service of its nature in WA, and is now 130 years old. The workforce consists of over 300 employees with a leadership group and corporate functions including quality, research and practice support. Ngala’s overall governance is through a Board of Directors who provide oversight with the CEO/ Executive team.

Ngala’s Research Group consists of internal senior staff and researchers from WA universities and research institutes who meet regularly to support the research and evaluation functions at Ngala and collaborate on research and evaluation projects. The Research Group utilised the following five data sets to identify trends and changes in organisational culture over the past decade.

Archived internal documents

Internal documents provide rich information, enabling an understanding of change exemplars occurring over the past decade. For example, frameworks, service models and systems were developed to support service and evaluation planning. Professional development activities, such as a journal club and team reflections, have contributed to data demonstrating organisational change.

Action learning and review cycles

Research and evaluation plans are developed and reviewed annually. The Research Group begins each year reflecting on achievements from the previous year and reviews plans for the year ahead. The research and evaluation plans are consistent with the organisation’s strategic intent and business plan, and are underpinned by the research priorities.

Service research and evaluation projects

A research and evaluation register is maintained. This is monitored through the Research Group agenda and progress is documented. Student projects are pivotal to undertaking work which supports the research agenda.

Published papers and conference presentations

Published papers and conference presentations reflect activities and outcomes of research and evaluation at Ngala

and contribute to knowledge exchange and dissemination of outcomes.

Audit of status

Ngala's commitment to delivery of quality services includes the monitoring of status through service evaluation and internal auditing processes. In October 2019, an audit was conducted to provide a benchmark for evidence-informed practice (EIP) within the organisation through the use of the *Organisational audit for evidence-informed practice*, designed in the United Kingdom (UK) to improve practice and outcomes for children and families.⁵ The tool provided data on the perceptions of the leadership team on the EIP at Ngala.

Critical factors for sustaining an EIP culture

Experienced researchers and practitioners who have been in the workforce a long time have observed, more than ever, the need to ensure CSOs are meeting standards for EIP. Wimbush⁶ argues that, at recruitment, practitioners often lack capacity for research awareness and understanding. For the majority of practitioners, research is not an integral part of their practice but an additional responsibility, constrained by the practical difficulties of lack of time and funding as well as lack of research expertise, confidence and credibility.⁶ Wimbush⁶ also expresses the urgent need to address the research training needs of practitioners in a policy environment where there is a greater emphasis on accountability, assessing effectiveness and evidence-based practice.

So, the question is: What has really changed in the 3 decades later since Wimbush's research? In an Australian study of organisations, Schwarzman⁴ found that, despite the growing demand for improved quality of evaluation and greater capacity to undertake evaluation or research, there is a lack of evidence of the impact of challenges and facilitators to evaluation practice within the health promotion field.

This case study utilised the work of Schwarzman in reviewing the five data sets, discussed earlier, in presenting the foundational components to sustain a research and evaluation culture within Ngala. Thus, it is relevant that Schwarzman's⁴ critical factors for influencing and sustaining organisational evaluation research culture are used to structure a review of the literature – leadership, organisation culture, building capacity and sharing learning.

Leadership

The need for a positive and enabling research culture is apparent in the literature, and various authors have highlighted the importance of creating enabling and sustaining research environments.^{7,8} Recognition of the level of investment required to create positive, enabling and generative environments needs to be understood by leadership and management and incorporated into strategic intent frameworks and plans.⁸ Many agencies concerned with healthcare quality and performance have emphasised the need for cultural change to be implemented alongside structural, financial and procedural performance monitoring.⁹ The development of research capacity is complex as it needs to address a combination of structural and cultural challenges unfolding within specific contexts, some of which

may be highly specific and situational and require strong leadership to engage change such as commitments from the board, executive and management.⁹

Dull¹⁰ argued that the experience of many organisations demonstrated that long-term commitment to building systems, engaging stakeholders, and changing organisational culture is required to reach sustainability. AbuJbara and Worley¹¹ assert that leadership "soft skills", such as wisdom and intelligence, complex problem-solving, collaboration and teamwork, and honesty and trust, are essential leadership qualities to enable leadership excellence. If staff trust leadership they will typically exhibit high levels of job satisfaction and openness, and a belief that the organisation does good work.¹²

Supervisors and front-line managers play important roles in implementation of EIP by shaping team culture, as evidenced by a shared belief that implementation is expected and supported.¹³ The study found that frontline managers fulfilled three roles during implementation: they diffused and summarised information proactively and in response to workers' questions; they mediated between strategy and day-to-day tasks by translating senior managers' project plans into day-to-day tasks through close monitoring and reminders; and they justified implementation. Together, these roles interacted to convey strong expectations and support for implementation with practitioners. Albers et al.¹⁴ propose that the idea of this "implementation science" needs to be applied in contemporary community program practice. Implementation science recognises and incorporates complexities of program implementation processes and identifies key influences assisting individuals, organisations and systems to understand and guide implementation of research to practice. Leadership has been identified as a key factor in supporting implementation science.¹⁴

Organisation culture

To enable a culture of research and evaluation to be embedded within an organisation's practice in the longer term, appropriate organisational systems and structures are required.^{15,16} Bohni Nielsen^{17(p.326)} states that an organisation's evaluation capacity is "intrinsically linked to its objectives, structure and processes, technology, and human capital". This includes effective communication of evaluation and reporting requirements, access to technical support, and individual capacity building within the organisation.¹⁶

Effective communication and dissemination of knowledge are integral in supporting an evaluation culture.^{16,18} Corbett et al.¹⁹ also highlight the presence of these elements as a feature of organisational leadership. Furthermore, they believe that, by involving the leaders, either as co-researchers or through good communication processes, organisational support for evaluation and research can be sustained. Good communication is one of the necessary "soft skills" that increases capacity to embed evaluation and research practices.¹⁹ Additionally, according to AbuJbara and Worley¹¹, communication is one of the soft skills that contribute to staff motivation and a positive work culture.

Communication and knowledge sharing can be made possible by utilising technology-based systems such as shared computer drives, databases and the use of cloud-based

platforms. Technology that supports both qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods includes software enabling quality design, data collection and analysis.¹⁷ For example, applications for online survey data collection, such as SurveyMonkey and QuestionPro, are readily available and can facilitate efficient data collection and analysis. Technological support is one of the critical factors, from an organisational context, that contributes to the improvement of program outcomes. However, funders may approach evaluation from an economic perspective, often unappreciative of the costs and technology required to undertake evaluations of funded programs.²⁰

Competing priorities for evaluation can be problematic for CSOs which may impact on the role that systems play within the organisation.¹⁶ For example, for CSOs with programs funded by government agencies, the focus may be on governance and program review to facilitate evaluation whereas, for a government agency, the focus of evaluation may be on systems that record and monitor.¹⁶ As funding of programs (and re-funding) remain a necessity for CSO program sustainability, these competing priorities are challenging, and therefore evaluation capacity building is crucial. According to Cousins et al.^{18(p.3)}, it is imperative that organisations are able to gain support from staff for program evaluation “to go beyond simply meeting program accountability requirements, integrating program evaluation into service delivery programs”. For an organisation, the benefits of building the evaluation capacity of staff may be threefold: to collect evidence that measures program outcomes; to demonstrate the value of their work and increase accountability; and to provide an evidence base to secure new or ongoing funding.¹⁵ Evaluation capacity building needs to focus on a whole of organisation approach for sustainability which means that evaluation needs to be seen as more than a “onetime event”.¹⁵

Building capacity

Seeking a culture of continuous improvement is crucial to grow the desire for further innovation.¹² Alongside this, leadership needs to support practitioner-based evaluative research and include research projects in operational/annual plans. Rigau et al.²¹ also support this concept as they have identified a lack of opportunities across early intervention programs for practitioners to build knowledge and skills needed for meaningful engagement in evaluative research.

Building staff skills and confidence through professional development and training are seen to be important for enabling a positive research culture.^{8,21} Reflective practice supervision and support for implementation can also support culture change which is an ongoing and evolving process involving the difficult work of critically re-examining the language, values, assumptions, attitudes, practices, approaches and policies embedded within an organisation.²²

Sharing learning

Sustaining dialogue between practitioners and researchers improves theory and informs practice.¹⁰ According to Reimer²³, the building of expertise requires common vision and goals, harnessing the energy that comes from collaborative work. There are benefits to interdisciplinary teamwork, and the

key attributes of interdisciplinary research teams – including team purpose, communication, cohesion, mutual respect and reflection – are well recorded.³ These attributes have been fostered at Ngala via regular meetings with representatives from various disciplines from all the WA universities and result in cross pollination of ideas and inclusion of student projects.² Having the support from universities gives access to ethics processes and approvals, knowledge translation opportunities, data-based decision making and various resources to enhance rigour for research and evaluation.^{12,19,23}

A review of the literature has provided a clearer understanding of the importance of these critical factors for influencing and sustaining organisational evaluation research culture in a CSO like Ngala.

Research design and method

A case study methodology was selected for this study as it provides a useful strategy to produce an in-depth understanding when a situation is not well understood.²⁴ It also allowed the Research Group to retain holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events such as organisational and management processes, small group behaviour and community change.

An embedded, single-case study design focuses on the main unit being the organisation for analysis.²⁴ Multiple sources of data are brought together which capture the story of the single case study. Different sources of data collection were used, ranging from a document audit collected from various internal sources which included meeting minutes of action and review cycles, various reports, presentations, audits of practice and journal articles, and the leadership survey audit. The accumulated summaries of data were analysed and grouped under four critical factors for sustaining a research and evaluation culture as guided by Schwarzman Schwarzman⁴ – leadership, organisation culture, building capacity and sharing learning.

Findings

The findings of the case study are presented using the multi-method approach described above.

The perceptions of the leadership team on the EIP at Ngala were assessed by using the survey audit tool⁵. The Ngala service leadership group (n=26) were asked to participate in the audit and 21 staff members completed the tool (see Figure 1). The four factors (leadership, organisation culture, building capacity and sharing learning) each consisted of five to six statements (items) that were rated on a 4-point Likert scale to determine meaning of aggregate scores and direction. The scores for each factor/section are presented. This baseline data provides the organisation with an indication of where leaders feel the organisation’s evidence-informed status is currently and will enable regular iterations of the audit to monitor progress.

Leadership

This factor has six items that focus on organisational strategy, planning and accountability. It considers how senior practitioners are promoting learning from research and

Audit tool: Organisational audit for EIP⁵

Leadership

- We know who is accountable for embedding evidence-informed practice.
- We have a clear vision and strategy for embedding evidence-informed practice.
- We have an action plan to operationalise evidence-informed practice.
- Our senior practitioner roles promote learning from research.
- We know how much we currently use evidence in our practice.
- Our business, service and team plans and procedures state how they are informed by evidence.

Organisation culture

- We welcome constructive challenge from all staff and their input into evidence-informed decisions.
- We value and encourage reflection to learn from both positive and negative experiences.
- We have ‘champions’ who act as catalysts in promoting evidence-informed practice.
- We expect practitioners to use evidence-informed tools and scales to support assessment of risk and to monitor outcomes.
- We report how we have used evidence in service planning and commissioning.
- We reward good practice in the use of evidence.

Building capacity

- Job descriptions, competencies and progression criteria state the evidence-informed practice skills and knowledge that staff are expected to demonstrate.
- Supervision, performance reviews and appraisals include discussion about and identification of goals around gathering and using evidence to inform practice.
- We provide learning opportunities for staff to develop their skills and knowledge around gathering and implementing evidence in practice.
- We provide access to research for all staff.
- We provide dedicated ongoing support to staff to appraise and apply evidence to their work.

Sharing learning

- Individuals, teams and multi-agency groups share and use learning from research and practice.
- We support staff to carry out their own research.
- We systematically gather and use service user views about experience and impact.
- We carry out impact evaluations about how well we did and the difference we made.
- We use information gathered from research and evaluations to improve our services.

Figure 1. The four main factors that support organisations to embed EIP

whether organisation, service and team plans and procedures state how they are informed by evidence. The collective results from leaders in Figure 2 (for all six questions) demonstrated most of the leadership team acknowledged progress towards this goal, with commitment to accountability and with more work required around communication and promoting learning opportunities for staff. A comment reflecting this was that:

Senior practitioners are often not good at sharing information and research due to time constraints. Not sure that it is broadly known who in leadership is embedding EIP.

Organisation culture

This factor also has six items. These consider values, attitudes, critical thinking and expectations around using EIP tools, reflective practice, and monitoring and reporting of outcomes. Also included is the availability of champions who act as catalysts in promoting EIP. Figure 3 presents the aggregated responses to the six items which reflects the positive culture that is developing, recognising that planning needs to focus on the gaps. A comment suggested:

For an EIP culture this remains ongoing work with an effort to reach practitioner groups.

Building capacity

This factor has five items. These focus on how staff are managed and supported with human resource practices, expectations and learning opportunities. This includes staff access to research and professional development to develop practitioner skills and knowledge around gathering and implementing evidence in practice. Figure 4 represents the collective responses which indicate the perception that



Figure 2. Leadership

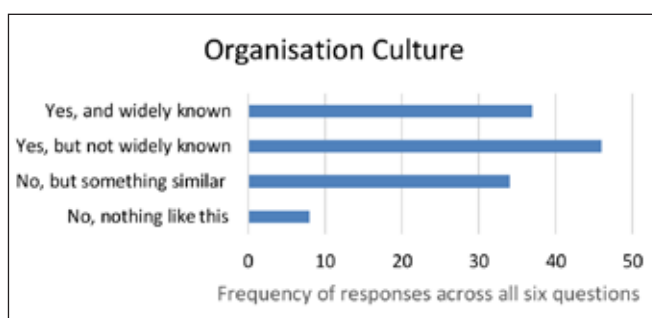


Figure 3. Organisation culture

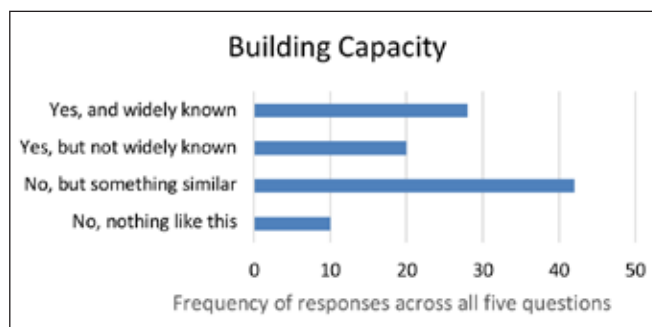


Figure 4. Building capacity

building capacity needs improvement, that is, increased attention at line management and practitioner level to increase capacity for reflective practice and professional development on evaluative research capabilities. Also, a greater effort is needed to establish a systematic approach with frontline coordinators and practitioners and to have a greater understanding of their service model, planning and data collection processes and reporting of data. Comments included:

We have shared learning from – reflective practice sessions weekly, feedback from staff on study days, organisation study days, lunch time sessions, self-directed learning from staff.

Continue to raise the profile of translation of evidence into practice and resourcing the ability to demonstrate accountability.

Sharing learning

This is the fourth factor and has five items. These include how individuals, teams and cross-agency groups share and use learning from research and practice, in addition to how quality systems are used in a systematic way to demonstrate outcomes and learning to improve service delivery and practice. Figure 5 reflects the collective perceptions and a need for greater improvement in this area. Innovative strategies can be considered for communication flow and enhancing shared learning opportunities with frontline staff. This includes the ability to attend reflective practice teams and undertake quality and evaluation activities within practice settings, and the expectation that this forms part of the professional role. A comment reflecting this position is that:

There is encouragement but often time is a factor that inhibits action... staff need more support and training on the how.

Discussion

The need to build and sustain an evidence-informed culture is becoming of vital importance for CSOs in these current times of reduced funding, increased governance requirements, and retaining a workforce committed to critically evaluating their work and accountability to the consumer. The four critical success factors discussed in the literature (leadership, organisation culture, sharing learning and building capacity) are used to validate Ngala’s practice in building an evidence-informed culture over the past decade. Effective leadership is pivotal for success, and developing a positive culture takes time. Building a sustainable model requires the addition of

resources and personnel to engage practitioners in change. Effective systems and structures need to be developed and established and easy access to resources in building a positive culture is crucial.¹⁸

Bennett et al.² presented the initial Ngala interdisciplinary research framework almost a decade ago. An action research project identified the needs, expectations and barriers for practitioners in their work and developed strategies to mitigate these. So, what have been the key learnings since this time?

It is challenging when a CSO such as Ngala has so many diverse service areas both in metropolitan Perth and the regions of WA. Perth is the most isolated city in the world and the state of WA is the largest Australian land mass. We are fortunate to partner with all five progressive universities in Perth, as well as WA’s leading children’s research institute, the Telethon Kids Institute. Over the last decade, Ngala has grown exponentially from a small to a medium-sized organisation. However, with declining resources, maintaining a focus on research and evaluation can be a challenge. There are aspects over time that have worked well, as well as moments of despair. These reflections have provided insight and fostered a deeper commitment to planning.

The CEO and Board are committed to resourcing the research agenda, building a research culture and key partnerships. Ngala has recently built the quality agenda to a successful level which operates alongside the research agenda. Having committed senior leaders and consistent support from researchers has enabled a sustained focus on the research agenda and assisted to keep research and evaluation in the forefront of minds as well as maintaining relationships with universities. Partnerships with university academics have been pivotal to the success of Ngala’s research agenda through providing support and advice with research methodologies, ethics, grants and student involvement. This was supported by Dull’s research which reinforces that partnerships sustaining dialogue improve theory and inform practice which enhances quality service provision.¹⁰

Additionally, the perceptions of leaders discussed earlier reflected our status as an evidence-informed organisation. This audit provided areas for development that the organisation can now plan for and build on, including effective communication and innovation strategies with practitioners which will potentially energise the frontline working with families and children. Ngala has been investing in increasing the level of reflective practice and will identify how to further develop and nurture practice development champions who can also function as mentors to other staff in the future. At a program level, factors include quality of the program training, materials and support processes. Practitioner factors include attitudes and beliefs, as well as skills and confidence. Overcoming challenges to developing partnerships with practitioners is necessary to ensure improved family- and child-centred outcomes.¹⁹

Undertaking research and evaluation projects and involving staff in the implementation has been one way which has contributed towards building an EIP culture at Ngala. These examples have been published.^{1,2,25-27} For example, in

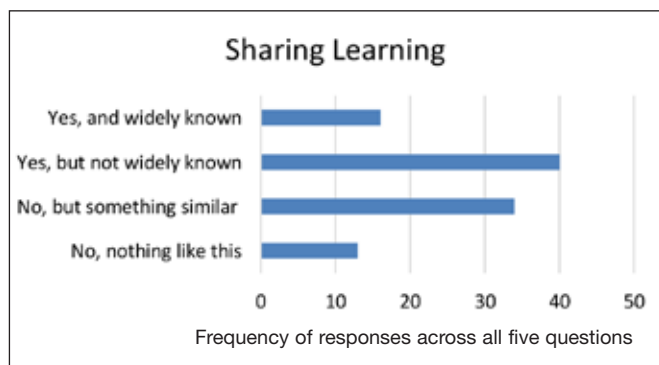


Figure 5. Sharing learning

2018–19, Ngala commenced auditing their service areas to establish a baseline on: how their service models met the established criteria; whether outcomes and performance measures were consistent with service plans; and how data was collected, analysed and reported. Having a quality loop from service outcomes through to reporting and review is crucial; however, this is still a work in progress. Ngala is data rich but still not at the point of having an effective and streamlined database management system and resource support for analysis and reporting.

As a result of partnerships with academics and universities, Ngala has collaborated with or supported research in the parenting sector. Examples include the Hauck et al.²⁸ Delphi study to investigate the research needs of staff; the development and validation of a Tuned in Parenting assessment scale for perinatal mental health and parent/child attachment²⁹; and the development of a knowledge base on fatherhood engagement in the early parenting sector.^{25,30} A current national project with a multi-site study with other early parenting organisations across Australia and New Zealand focuses on the use of digital technologies in parenting services.³¹

The longevity of core research collaborations has been important in long-term research agenda support. The commitment has strengthened Ngala's ability to promote EIP through professional development, resource sharing and enhancing the rigour of collaborative projects which have provided mentoring and support for developing researchers. As a result of relationships built with the university sector, Ngala has been able to enhance the organisation's profile and attract an undergraduate and postgraduate student workforce.

During 2018–9, the CEO/Board added resources to maintain and further develop the research and evaluation agenda. This has resulted in the ability to assess the organisation's needs to become an EIP. Over this time, Ngala has attracted small grants to grow our evaluation and research capability.

Conclusion

The environment surrounding CSOs is such that not having resources to sustain and grow research and evaluation processes leaves the organisation at risk. Stakeholders and funders require services to demonstrate how outcomes are achieved and their impact on consumers. Dedication from management, practitioners, researchers, and external university partners is required to establish and maintain an EIP culture, which takes time, resources and patience.

This paper has presented key criteria for enabling sustainability as an EIP organisation and examples have been provided of how the challenges have been met against each criterion at Ngala. Strong leadership and research partnerships developed over the past decade since Bennett et al.² are pivotal to growth and maturity into a fully EIP organisation.

Contributorship

EB, WS primary authors and all authors' contribution to the conception, design, data collection and analysis and the revising and final approval of this manuscript.

Ethical approval

The research protocol was approved by Ngala within the framework of a constituted ethics committee within which the work was carried out and it conforms to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007 (Updated 2018), NHMRC, Australia.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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