

2005 Public Health Awards for Excellence and Innovation:

Public Health Programs Award for Innovation

Snake Condoms Initiative

Marie Stopes Australia, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and Cummins and Partners

The Snake Condoms Initiative is tackling serious sexual health issues amongst Indigenous teenagers by improving access to condoms and making them more culturally relevant and appealing to the Indigenous community.

The standard of reproductive health for Indigenous Australians is a significant public health concern¹. Indigenous teenage pregnancy rates are five times higher than for non-Indigenous teenagers and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are far more common in Indigenous communities than in non-Indigenous communities.

The Snake Condoms Initiative has involved young Aboriginals at all stages – from research through to designing the condom and distributing it.

'PhotoVoice', an initiative of Marie Stopes Australia (MSA) and the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), worked with Aboriginal youth in Mildura, Shepparton and Warrnambool to identify sexual health issues. This research highlighted the rising rates of STIs, HIV and unplanned pregnancies and revealed that young Indigenous people felt intimidated buying condoms from retail outlets.

Based on this research, MSA, VACCHO, the Mildura Aboriginal Health Service and advertising agency Cummins & Partners worked with Indigenous youth to design the condom brand. The branding is fun and uses Indigenous art and colours to appeal to Indigenous youth.

The next step was training young people about sexual health so that they felt comfortable talking about safe sex to their peers. For the first time in Australia, young Indigenous people were trained as 'peer sellers' and now sell Snake condoms at parties and other places where young people gather, increasing access to condoms. Snake condoms are also available at late night eateries, burger vans, pubs and cafes as well as traditional outlets.

The initiative piloted in Mildura for a three-month period and was a huge success. Sales of Snake condoms exceeded all expectations and the public health impact was dramatic. Evaluation of the pilot indicates that Indigenous people aged 16–30 are now more likely to use condoms, are more worried about having unsafe/unprotected sex and are more likely to recall and purchase Snake than any other condom brand.

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¹ Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2001, AIHW National Perinatal Statistics Unit 2000, UNFPA State of the World Population 2000, Healthinfonet website