



Overcoming barriers to cervical screening for First Nations women: Southern Cross Uni to lead \$2.5m project



FOR most women, cervical screening can be an awkward but necessary test. Yet for First Nations women, additional

barriers, such as a lack of access to culturally safe care and stigma are leading to lower screening rates, putting them at a higher risk of developing cervical cancer.

Southern Cross University has been awarded \$2,498,994 over three-years from the federal government through Cancer Australia's Partnerships for Cancer Research grant program for the innovative project, SISTASCREEN (2024/PCR/2044742).

SISTASCREEN will codesign and implement strategies to increase uptake of opportunistic cervical screening during pregnancy and postpartum for First Nations women.

The project's chief investigator is Worimi woman Dr Marilyn Clarke from the Faculty of Health at the University's Coffs Harbour campus. Dr Clarke is an obstetrician and gynaecologist who has been working on Gumbaynggirr country for the past 20 years.

"SISTASCREEN aims to increase cervical screening rates by offering the test during routine antenatal checkups," said Dr Clarke.

"Antenatal visits at their local Aboriginal community-controlled



SCU's, Dr Marilyn Clarke.

health service are an opportunistic time to engage First Nations women in cervical screening in a way which ensures culturally safety and empowerment."

Amongst First Nations women, there is a persistent disparity in the incidence and mortality of cervical cancer as well as in cervical screening rates.

"Engaging women early in positive cervical screening experiences and treatment pathways will set them up to engage in regular screening during their life course beyond the pregnancy. SISTASCREEN aims to ensure First Nations women are not left behind as Australia works towards the elimination of cervical cancer," said Dr Clarke.

"Engaging women early in positive cervical screening experiences and treatment pathways will set them up to

engage in regular screening during their life course beyond the pregnancy. SISTASCREEN aims to ensure First Nations women are not left behind as Australia works towards the elimination of cervical cancer."

Partnership with NACCHO

Southern Cross University will be partnering with the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) to create and deliver the project.

NACCHO CEO, Pat Turner AM, welcomed the partnership, saying: "For too long, our women have faced barriers to lifesaving screening and care, barriers rooted in systems that weren't designed for us, by us. The truth is, we cannot eliminate cervical cancer in Australia while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women continue to be left behind.

"SISTASCREEN is about more than closing a gap in statistics. It's about putting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at the centre of solutions, embedding screening and care within our own health services, led by our own workforce, in a way that is culturally safe and empowering," said Ms Turner.

"This project gives us the chance to reach women at a critical moment in their lives, while they are pregnant and engaging with antenatal care, so that we can support their health and wellbeing, now and into the future.

NACCHO is proud to partner with Southern Cross University and our network of ACCHOs to drive this work forward. Together, we are building the evidence, the workforce, and the trust needed to ensure every woman has the care she deserves. Our women's health cannot wait, and neither can we."

Six 'early adopter' sites will be selected as SISTASCREEN partners. The first to come onboard is Bullinah Aboriginal Health Service at Ballina on the NSW North Coast. The project's goal is 50 sites nationally in three years' time.

"We'll work primarily with six early adopter sites. Once we've co-created and co-designed the resources, we then hope to then roll it out to 50 sites across the NACCHO network," said Dr Clarke.

"At the same time, we want to increase the capacity and skill level of the First Nations workforce.

"SISTASCREEN will build the capacity of health providers to have the confidence and knowledge to offer pregnant First Nations women a self-collected or clinician-collected cervical screening test."

SISTASCREEN complements two other projects led by Southern Cross University aiming to improve the health outcomes of Indigenous women: SISTABIRTH (culturally appropriate perinatal

model of care for mothers and their babies) and iSISTAQUIT (cessation of smoking/vaping).

Facts

Australia's First Nations women have more than twice the cervical cancer incidence (2.3 times) and a nearly four times (3.6 times) mortality rate than non-Indigenous women.

Increased risks are related to under-screening and late detection of pre-cancerous lesions, representing a system failure for Aboriginal women.

Cervical screening rates are lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women due to a combination of factors, including cultural barriers, lack of awareness, logistical challenges, and historical and systemic issues. Additional barriers include remoteness, socioeconomic disadvantage, and the need for culturally safe healthcare services.

In 2023, only 42.5% of eligible First Nations women had a cervical screening test within the previous five years.

Cancer Australia Partnerships for Cancer Research grant program

The Cancer Australia Partnerships for Cancer Research grant program supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and the research sector to work together with community in delivering research activities that inform inclusive and equitable cancer care.



Southern Cross University

There has never been a better time to study

At Southern Cross University we understand that Indigenous knowledge is always current. Gnibi College of Indigenous Australian Peoples is committed to delivering culturally safe, dynamic and innovative courses, providing professional career pathways, and engaging in scholarship and research relevant to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We are one of the top universities in Australia for Indigenous students and offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the discipline of Indigenous Knowledge, Nursing and Midwifery, Education, Law, Business, Science, Engineering, Social Work and Psychology to name a few. This year 113 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will graduate across all faculties/colleges.

With full-time, part-time and pathway options, now is the perfect time to apply at Southern Cross University for 2026. You can study in bite-sized pieces and find the perfect balance between work, life and study.

Apply now to study in 2026:



CRICOS Provider: 01241G
TEQSA Provider Code: PRV12043 Australian University



Bachelor of Indigenous Knowledge graduates Pearl Andrews, Anthony Hack and Keyarra Sweetwater-Delauney with Southern Cross University Chancellor Sandra McPhee AM and Gnibi Lecturer Dr Kylie Day