

Pitjantjajara ngangkari receive rightful recognition



Left to right: Andy Tjilari, Professor Helen Milroy, and Rupert Peter.

Two ngangkari (traditional healers) from Central Australia have been awarded the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatry (RANZCP) Mark Sheldon Prize for 2009.

Andy Tjilari and Rupert Peter have worked as ngangkari for NPY Women's Council in Alice Springs for a decade providing traditional treatments for indigenous people in the communities of the cross-border areas of SA, WA and the NT.

The ngangkaris focus on mental health problems.

The award acknowledges Andy and Rupert's lifelong work as ngangkari and their extensive provision of consultation, advice and treatment across Aboriginal communities.

It also recognises their commitment to educating health professionals about indigenous healing methods and cultural knowledge.

The award recognises outstanding contributions to Indigenous mental health in either New Zealand or Australia.

The prize was established in 2000 to honour the memory of the late Dr Mark Sheldon, a psychiatrist and Fellow of the RANZCP who

was devoted to the welfare of indigenous people in remote communities.

Andy and Rupert travelled to Adelaide to accept the award at the annual RANZCP College Congress earlier this year.

They said they were very happy and proud to receive the prize, and especially pleased that their work, and that of all ngangkari, is recognised as important to the well-being of indigenous people.

Andy and Rupert said they enjoy working alongside doctors and psychiatrists, and that they were honoured to receive an award from respected colleagues.

Their work at NPY Women's Council is funded by the South Australian Health Department.

The ngangkari say governments should continue to support traditional medicine as a support to modern methods, and partnerships on Indigenous mental health need to be encouraged.

BRINGING ANCESTORS HOME



Above l-r: Donald Gumurdul, Joaz Wurramara, Thomas Amagula, Alfred Nayingul in the US

The return of ancestral human remains, originally taken by the American - Australian Scientific Expedition to Aboriginal North Australia in 1948, to the people of Gunbalanya and Groote Eylandt has been an emotional journey.

It all began in March 2008 when a meeting was held in Darwin about the repatriation of Aboriginal remains from international museums.

Laurey Richardson, FaHCSIA's International Director based in Canberra, had been leading negotiations and listening to the concerns of Aboriginal people about the need to bring the remains of ancestors back home.

In particular, the Darwin meeting talked about remains

from Gunbalanya and Groote Eylandt that were being held in a Washington DC museum.

"They were discussing about how we were going to go about it and get them back — how we were going to go across to Washington to talk to the Smithsonian Museum," Mr Thomas Amagula from the Anindilyakwa Land Council said.

"Four of us actually went to Washington — myself and Joaz Wurramara who is also from Groote Eylandt, and Donald Gumurdul and Alfred Nayingul from Gunbalanya.

We sat down with the Smithsonian bosses to convince them to bring all

of the remains back, all of them. But they wouldn't allow us."

Only those belonging to 13 people came back to Groote Eylandt.

"When we went to meet up with the Ambassador, the remains were waiting for us in the conference room," Mr Amagula continues. "And as we walked in we saw these remains and the four of

Eylandt and Donald and Alfred from Gunbalanya, sat together for the long flight home.

They were surprised to find their ancestors travelled in a similar way.

"As we were travelling back the four of us sat together and we said 'Did you know that all of our remains travelled together as an Arnhem Land family?'"

"We went towards the crate and talked to those old people, We're here and we're taking you home."

Thomas Anagula

us actually looked at each other.

"We went towards the crate and talked to those old people, 'we're here and we're taking you home'. We had a five minutes silence the four of us.

"We greeted the remains, we said hello and we told the people we are here to take them home, 'back to where you belong'.

"Before we left Washington, we went to see the other remains that are left behind and we told them 'we are coming back to bring you back home'. The four of us we were very, very upset for leaving them behind."

The four men, Thomas and Joaz from Groote

"That's why the remains from both communities are very special to

us now. As we left Australia we didn't know the four of us would link as families and the trip was a special trip.

"It's one of the best experiences I've ever had and it links Groote Eylandt and Gunbalanya together, bringing remains back to our own country.

"It's like the stolen generation to us.

"The families of those bones are still alive and the extended family are wishing that they all return and I want to see that happen."

The 1948 expedition collected more than 50,000 archaeological, ethnographic and natural history specimens from indigenous Australians.