

## **‘HEALTHY PETS, HEALTHY HEADS’-CAMP DOGS NT: CATALYSTS TO INCREASING BONDING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN OUTBACK AUSTRALIA**

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**T**he aim of our initiative is to raise the bonding social capital in remote aboriginal communities in outback Australia. In societies with widening levels of socio-economic inequality, psycho-social community health deteriorates. For aboriginal Australians, the social determinants of health (adequate income & infrastructure) between town and remote dwellers are unacceptably wide. Such disadvantage detrimentally impacts on residents' mental health and their capacity to care for their animals, resulting in many neglected and starving dogs. Traditionally, aboriginal people valued dogs for their hunting skills, companionship and security, especially for vulnerable community members. Poor camp dog health and welfare is a symptom of the reduced living conditions in these communities. The entrenched poverty and psychosocial disadvantage in the 73 remote communities has (a) eroded their dog care capacity, (b) frayed the fabric of bonding social capital, and (c) diminished the avenues available to mental health patients for re-creating social protective bonds in the community. Re-establishing a community's capacity to address dog welfare has been found to increase social ties and support, community trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement. Additionally, animal care fosters sound psychosocial development in children which will in turn enhance their resilience in adulthood. The importance of animal-human bonds remains largely un-addressed in the training of all mental health professionals despite its therapeutic value in mental health. Our 'Pet Protector' program is a community mental health initiative designed to be delivered primarily through workshops for children aged 5-11yrs in the remote community schools teaching them how to provide basic dog care, and the positive effect on their mental health. The aim is to improve the social bonding capital in the communities with the children leading the way. This inexpensive mental health initiative focuses on pet care and how it leads to enhancing everyone's mental health in the short and long-term.

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### **Biography**

Verushka Krigovsky gained her fellowship of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists in 2012. Prior to completing Medicine, she worked as a Lawyer for Legal Aid in Canberra, Australia's capital city. She has always had an interest in Cross-Cultural Psychiatry and spent 5 years employed as a Medical Officer in Singapore in the Department of Psychiatry at the National University Hospital prior to completing her specialist training back in Australia. She has worked in the Northern Territory in remote mental health both in an acute inpatient setting and in remote aboriginal communities for over a decade. She has a particular interest in exploring the clinical benefits of animal companions in regaining and maintaining mental health, particularly amongst the aboriginal people living in the very remote areas of outback Australia.

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