

The power of marketing in health care: A way to narrow the disparities in health outcomes for First Nations communities

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Researchers from Wiradjuri Land, Edith Cowan University, University of Wollongong, University of Melbourne, University of Tasmania, and

University of South Australia published a *Journal of Marketing* study that explores the role of marketing in decolonizing health care by examining the "Birthing on Country" policy, an initiative led by First Nations Australians that encourages women to give birth on their ancestral lands by adopting traditional birthing practices.

The study is titled "[On the Path to Decolonizing Health Care Services: The Role of Marketing](#)" and is authored by Reece George, Steven D'Alessandro, Mehmet Ibrahim Mehmet, Mona Nikidehaghani, Michelle Evans, Gaurangi Laud, and Deirdre Tedmanson.

First Nations people "suffer from poorer health, are more likely to experience disability and reduced quality of life, and ultimately die younger than their non-indigenous counterparts," according to the United Nations. Here, the term "First Nations" includes Indigenous, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Native, American Indian, First Alaskans, Native Hawaiians, Māori, Metis, and Inuit peoples.

Studies show that, in Australia, the life expectancy of First Nations males is 8.6 years less than the general population, and the corresponding number for females is 7.8 years. Similarly, the life expectancy of North American Indians and Alaskan Natives is 4.4 years less.

The health care sector in countries like Canada, the United States, and Australia has long overlooked the unique needs and perspectives of First Nations people and this oversight has resulted in significant disparities in health outcomes for these communities as compared to the general population. What can be done to bridge this gap?

This new study explores the role of marketing in decolonizing health care. The authors focus on the "[Birthing on Country](#)" policy, an initiative led by First Nations Australians that encourages women to give birth on their [ancestral lands](#) by adopting traditional birthing practices—in stark

contrast to the western biomedical approaches that dominate the health care landscape.

The power of marketing in decolonizing health care

One of the most striking revelations is the power of marketing techniques in this decolonization process. Traditional marketing campaigns, such as those promoting handwashing or smoking cessation, have had ambiguous results in changing behavior. However, when these techniques are tailored to respect and incorporate First Nations perspectives, they can become potent tools for change.

For instance, the "Birthing on Country" policy did not gain traction simply because it was a good idea. The research shows that creating a strong brand identity for the policy, leveraging influential opinion leaders, forging alliances with key public and private entities, and establishing formalized systems, including training, were crucial for the policy's success. Additionally, it was not just about promoting the policy. It was about challenging the status quo, addressing resistance, and reshaping the health care landscape to be more inclusive of First Nations people.

The study's findings underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in health care. The authors say that "Western biomedical approaches, while effective in many ways, are not one-size-fits-all solutions. Different communities have different needs and it is crucial to recognize and respect these differences."

"Moreover, our findings highlight the transformative power of marketing. Often dismissed as just a tool for selling products, marketing, when used ethically and creatively, can drive societal change. It can challenge entrenched beliefs, bridge cultural divides, and pave the way for more equitable health care systems."

A roadmap for rethinking traditional approaches to health care

For health care professionals, policymakers, and marketers, the study offers a roadmap to rethink traditional approaches, be more inclusive, and harness the power of marketing for the greater good.

This study also has implications for First Nations people who wish to engage in decolonization. First Nations people can leverage marketing techniques and technologies to communicate the problem, promote the program, and design service delivery in a consistent fashion.

Additionally, marketing practices might be used to advocate for developing infrastructure that supports such health care services. In the case of "Birthing on Country" initiatives, this included:

- birthing centers funded by government and placed on First Nations land,
- culturally appropriate facilities, and
- community-led [health care services](#).

Another critical lesson for First Nations people is that they need a network of allies. First Nations people must build relationships and partnerships with parties who share their goals of decolonizing health care. This includes engaging with researchers, policymakers, health care professionals, and community organizations to develop collaborative strategies, share knowledge, and advocate for change. Without these alliances, there would only be pockets of decolonization scattered across the country.

"The path to decolonizing health care is complex, but marketing can be a powerful ally on this journey. It is time for all stakeholders to come together and work towards a more inclusive and equitable health care

future," say the authors.

More information: Reece George et al, On the Path to Decolonizing Health Care Services: The Role of Marketing, *Journal of Marketing* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429231209925](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429231209925)

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