

# Access to healthy and affordable food in Galiwin'ku: Ideas from the Walking Together Program

## *Submission: National strategy for food security in remote First Nations communities*

### Introduction

The Marrtjin Limurr Rambanjin Gunga'yun Yolŋu'-Yulŋuny Mala (Walking together to support Yolŋu people for good health) is a new health service in Galiwin'ku. Its aim is to reduce the heavy burden of chronic disease in the community. Working in close partnership with Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation, the University of Melbourne team is exploring innovative and community-guided ways to support Yolŋu people to:

- Have regular point of care health checks
- Have on-the-spot access to their results
- Understand the meaning of their results
- Identify manageable ways to prevent and slow down the development of diabetes and heart disease.

The program, which currently employs 14 local Yolŋu staff, is three months into delivering its service and we already have one hundred participants. At each health check we talk to people about what they are eating and drinking. We spend a lot of time encouraging people to improve the food they eat and drink less sugar-sweetened drinks. However, this is very hard to encourage and enforce when these foods and drinks are so readily available at the stores in Galiwin'ku, and healthy options less so. We are very worried about what people are choosing to buy and eat in Galiwin'ku due to the consequence on their health, wellbeing and the financial strain the high cost of food puts on people. Here we share some of our ideas for how things could change in Galiwin'ku to support people to be healthier and live longer lives.

### Food is very expensive

*Expensive food makes it hard for people to make healthy choices. It's very different shopping here, if you go with \$100 it's very quickly gone, but if you shop in Darwin you get a trolley full (Ruth Gulamanda, Senior Yolŋu Researcher, 2024).*

The cost of food impacts what people choose to buy and how much they can buy. In our program, we try and encourage a diet that depends less on carbohydrates (bread, damper, pasta, rice, noodles, sugar) and more on vegetables and high protein foods. However, meat and fish are very expensive which means people are more likely to fill up on carbohydrates like damper, or a type of porridge people make with flour, sugar and milk. In the body these carbohydrates turn into sugar and this leads to high rates of diabetes, heart disease and lots of people on dialysis.

The freight costs (food miles) incurred by the barge makes food in Galwini'ku very expensive; this has been exacerbated recently for two reasons: 1. The increase in fuel prices, and 2. The lack of competition of barge services when Auriga stopped operating in October 2023.

Many people on our program are unemployed and so they simply can't afford the more expensive food at the shops. Instead, they "fill up" on food that gives them quick energy like soft drink or tea with lots of sugar in it. We are trying really hard to support people to change these habits.

While people have the option of doing online Coles and Woolworths orders, the capacity for local Yolŋu people to do this is limited for the following reasons: 1. A very complex process is required to set up an account over the phone, 2. Computer illiteracy, 3. Unreliable internet access, 4. No transport to pick up supplies from the barge, and 5. Lack of disposable income to pay for large orders and the high barge freight costs.

## Access to the ALPA stores

ALPA are the only stores that maintain a healthy food policy in Galiwin'ku. However, this comes with limitations. The store hours are inconsistent – unlike the Bottom and Top Shops which are consistently open for much longer hours. This makes regular shopping for healthy food difficult. For example, recently the store has been closing around 4pm or 5pm. This means people who work during regular working hours have to shop at the Bottom and Top Shops where food is more expensive and there are less healthy options.

We understand that short opening hours at the store is often attributed to low staff numbers. Support of staff at the store needs to be prioritised. There could be more effort put into engaging kids after school to work at the store. Consideration needs to be given to the nature of staff support at the store i.e. we have heard stories about store

staff not being very understanding of the flexibility required for Yolŋu staff regarding their many other commitments to family, community and cultural events.

Balanda workers at all the stores, take aways and café need to be trained in culturally safe ways of working with Yolŋu staff and customers. There are reports that some staff are rude and “talk rubbish” to local people which is confronting and racist. Appropriate (compulsory) training will likely improve relationships between local staff, customers and Balanda managers, and will consequently lead to higher engagement of local staff.

## Policies and Guidelines for all food outlets in Galiwin’ku

Lots of people rely on the take aways and the cafes. These are expensive and mostly the preprepared food is high in unhealthy fat and sugar. ALPA has a nutrition policy but this is hard to enforce when people can go elsewhere for unhealthy food. We would really like to see policies for healthy food for all other outlets in Galiwin’ku: the Bottom Shop, Top Shop, Take aways, Manymak Ngatha café and the Elcho Fuel station.

The APLA store provides a great selection of fruit and vegetables. However, the Bottom and Top shop (which are open longer hours) have a very small and expensive selection of fresh food which is often hidden away in the fridge. At these stores, the sweets are very visible and at eye height for kids. Bottom and top shop sell a lot of “novelty sweets” including sweets that are made to look like toothbrushes, paint brushes, dummies, roll on deodorant etc. The toy-like quality of these sweets are alluring to children.



**Picture:** Sweets purchased from the Bottom Shop (photo taken in 2023)

Despite efforts for the school to reduce this, it is common for school children to go to the take aways, Bottom and Top shop and the café at recess and lunch. At the café, the slushy machine and cake display is in clear view of the ordering window and these become common “meals” for the kids who return to school and aren’t hungry for their healthy school-provided lunch.

We would like to see a community-wide nutrition policy that every agency and service adopts and is guided by. This would vastly support the health messages that programs like ours are sharing. For example, all workshops and training should provide healthy food, tea rooms should not provide sweet biscuits etc.

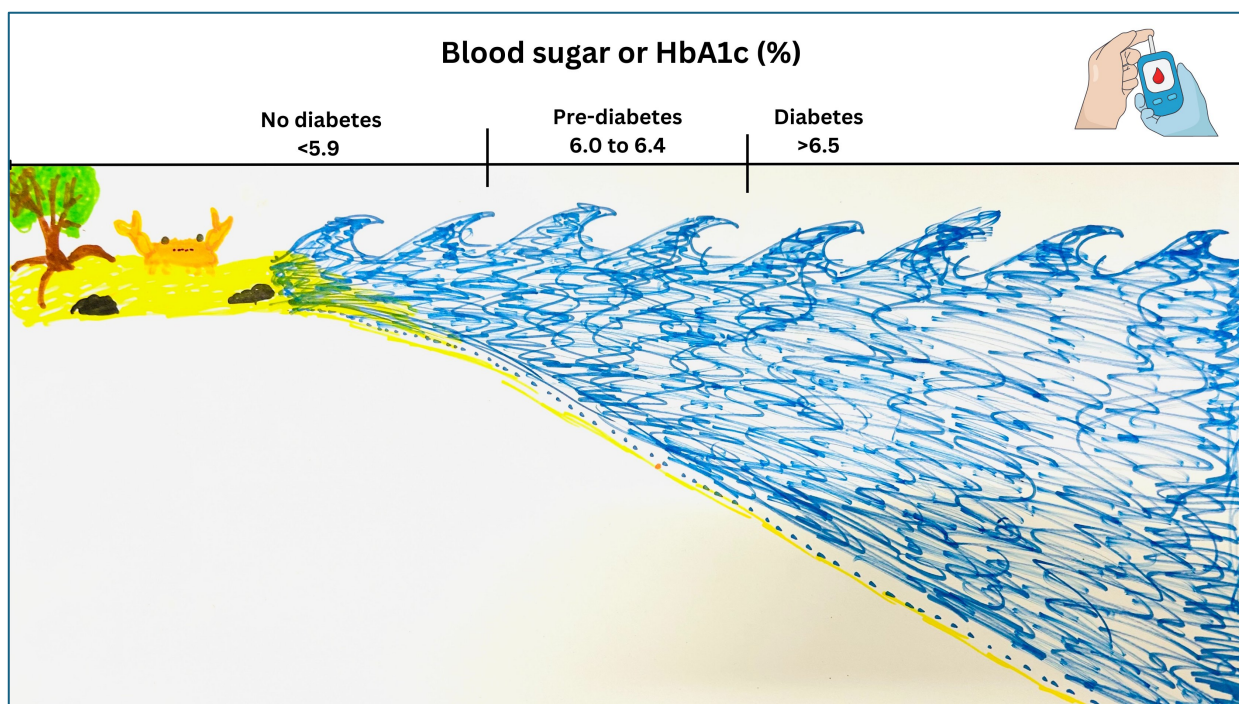
## Better nutrition information for the community

We are worried that lots of people don't understand about healthy eating and healthy food. This can partly be attributed to efforts in the past that rely on Balanda designed and delivered health promotion. We are trying to change this with our program by doing Yolŋu to Yolŋu health education during health checks. While sharing nutrition information is very important, we also work in a way that always avoids shaming people or worrying people while delivering health education.

One of our participants recently reported,

*This is my first time hearing and seeing the way people are helping the Yolŋu people; this check helped me in every way. I don't want to be out in the sea [referring to the deep water analogy we use to describe the level of worry regarding participants' health – see below]. I'm not going to have sugar anymore. It is our chance to change our wellbeing – to stop drinking the sugar drinks, cakes, custards and everything that's got sugar (Walking Together Participant, 2024).*





**Picture:** Part of our work is developing resources to help people understand their results in a meaningful way.

We would like to see an increase in nutrition workers in the community who learn how to delivery manymak ṇatha (good food) information in a way that makes sense for Yolṇu. This might include more healthy food information at the local stores to build people's understanding about what is best for their bodies (ie. Green tick stickers on good healthy foods).

In order to help us understand the dhudi dhāwu (deep knowledge) about the impact of food on our bodies, we are having regular health education sessions as part of our program with people who can explain the physiology of the body in Yolṇu matha. We learn about it in ways that make sense to us ie. developed with the foundations of Yolṇu knowledge in mind. This helps us in turn to share the dhāwu (stories/information) with the participants of the program to encourage them to make informed choices about what they eat and drink.

We are aware that children can become prone to chronic diseases based on what they eat as they are growing up. Hence, it's essential that the school take some responsibility in supporting children to understand why foods are good or not good for their body. To support this, we would like to see more health education in the school. This could be delivered through the bi-lingual school curriculum to reinforce messages from services like ours in the community. It's also important for all the staff at the school to be aware of the impact of unhealthy food on children. We think the school canteen guidelines

need greater enforcement at the school. For example, children at the school can buy unhealthy foods from the canteen at lunch and recess including icy poles like those below with no nutritional value:



water, sugar, food acids (330, 296), nature identical flavours, stabiliser (466), acidity regulator (331), preservative (211), colours (122, 102, 133).

[thesugarshack.com.au](https://thesugarshack.com.au)  
<https://thesugarshack.com.au/products/ka-bluey-freeze...>

KA BLUEY FREEZE POP SNAP STIX BLUE RASPBERRY 70ML

**Picture:** Icy poles sold at the school canteen

As part of our program, we value training young people to work with us and share messages about health and wellbeing. Training young people is really important, as they can then share the messages with their friends. We would all like more opportunities, particularly for young people, to learn about cooking healthy *natha* (food) and healthy meals for their families (like the *miyalk* – women – are doing in the CDP program here).

*First people are hearing the dhäwu (stories) about our program. It is at the houses that they see the real project. When they come to the house, or walk past, and see the health checks they really understand what it is about. We tell our families and colleagues about it and, lots of Yolŋu mala (people) are joining the program (Walking Together Team Member, 2024).*

## We are worried about what people are eating

*Back in the olden days, people were the right size and skinny. They used to hunt for their food and make bread/damper from seeds (dingu). The only sweet things on the island was guku (honey) but that was only one season in the year. Now Yolŋu people are eating lots of fizzy cool drinks and cordial, having lots of sugar in their tea and eating sweet things like biscuits, icecream, roll ups, lollies (Ruth Gulamanda, Senior Yolŋu researcher, 2024)*

Some of the knowledge about the healthy bushfoods is now getting lost. We need to find ways for young people to go out bush more with Elders so young people can learn about ways of surviving in the bush. This happens in the ranger program but it would be good to happen more; young people and families need more ways of getting out bush so they can learn about fruit, plants and seafood that they can hunt and eat.

In our program we are finding out that people are not eating many fruit and vegetables. This is often attribute to “not having enough money” and not having the nutritional education to understand the benefits of these foods.

## Locally grown and caught food available for purchase

A long time ago community members caught fish for the community to eat. We would like to see opportunities for young people to catch local seafood and grow produce that could be sold at the local store. Yolŋu mala really enjoy eating maypal (foods from the sea) but there are a lot of barriers to getting it themselves, including limited access to cars. If it was available at the store, people would buy it instead of the unhealthy foods.

## Capacity to cook healthy meals at home

There are a number of barriers to Yolŋu people cooking healthy meals at home:

- Electric cooking equipment is very expensive. At Bottom and Top shop these items have been purchased from the stores such as Kmart and Coles and are being resold for very high prices
- In overcrowded homes, people with cooking equipment often need to hide it away in between uses – if it’s left in the kitchen it may be taken by others in the house
- There are often long waits to address maintenance issues in homes such as power issues, broken stoves etc
- Even when people do want to cook and enjoy cooking, it can be a huge demand when cooking a meal for such huge numbers in one house. Hence, even those with the motivation to cook are unlikely to do so due to the massive demand
- Many people have had limited exposure to cooking healthy meals at home and don’t have the required skills

*Many Yolngu cook on the fire outside, when it is traditional food we know what to do and it does not need equipment to cook it. With balanda store food some Yolngu do not know how to cook it. We need to know the Balanda food story (Ruth Gulamanda, Senior Yolngu Researcher, 2024).*

## Recommendations:

- Lower prices on meat, seafood, fruit and vegetables
- Less access to unhealthy fatty and sweet food at the non-ALPA food outlets
- Government subsidies for Barge costs for store produce
- Have a community-wide nutrition policy
- Policies that monitors prices of cooking equipment and the resale of Coles / Kmart products at the take away for inflated prices
- Support programs that enable local food to be available at the stores
- Nutrition and Health education delivered in culturally appropriate ways
- Encourage all food outlets to provide cultural awareness and cultural safety training to Balanda staff
- Employ staff in food outlets whose roles are to support and empower local staff