



INTERVIEW WITH EDDIE MULHOLLAND, CEO

## Miwatj Health AC

Established in 1992, Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation is an independent, Aboriginal-controlled health service. Its mission is to improve the health and wellbeing of residents of East Arnhem Land communities through the delivery of appropriate and comprehensive primary health care. The fundamental right of Aboriginal people to control their own health services is Miwatj's underlying philosophy. Eddie Mulholland has been CEO since 2006.

**Before you joined in 2006 Miwatj Health had seen around 12 CEOs over their 14 years' of existence. What impact did this have on the organisation?**

Miwatj has been around for 22 years and has had a varied history. It didn't just turn to gold when I got here. It had periods of gold throughout its whole history because of the vision of its leaders, blokes like Mr Djerkurra, Mr Maymarru and CEO Mick Adams.

But there were periods of dysfunction when these people moved on. The purpose became unclear and there was a lack of good organisational culture. It takes about 12 months just to get respect from your clients and staff! So the CEO turnover I think caused the dysfunction, particularly during 2000 and 2006.

**What changes in Miwatj's governance or management have you implemented as CEO to turn this around?**

In 2006 Miwatj was in a pretty desperate situation. The governance was seen as dysfunctional and government was looking at defunding us. I was fortunate to come in when things were so bad because everyone knew change was necessary. Desperate times lead to desperate actions which enabled Miwatj to transition so quickly.

So we developed a new constitution designed to protect the board, CEO and organisation. We appointed two independent non-voting directors and a senior Yolngu cultural adviser to assist the board and CEO. We put restrictions on new members' voting rights to attract genuine members, not people with political agendas.

And most importantly we worked really hard on organisational culture and values. Today the values are everywhere in the office written in both Yolngu Matha and English. Everyone is expected to know them, live them and practice them.



ABOVE: Miwatj Health CEO Eddie Mulholland with AGMP Project Officer Wes Miller

Now whenever there are any complaints or disputes the first thing people will do is check compliance with Miwatj's values and that's what we want. So it's entrenched in people's minds that this is how we do business.

**How have staffing levels changed at Miwatj between now and when you started in 2006?**

In 2006 we had around 20 staff and were about a \$1.4 million organisation, providing services to roughly 300 people, mainly long-grassers in Nhulunbuy. Today staff numbers vary between 130 and 150 people and we're about an \$18-20 million organisation, providing clinical services to around 4,500 people. Our public health programs service around 9,000 people.

Miwatj has experienced continuous growth for the past eight years and it is likely to continue for the next three or four years when we will acquire the whole region to service. It would be a big risk if we tried to acquire two or three clinics at once so every time we are about to expand we evaluate our capacity to acquire another clinic.

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Eddie Mulholland, CEO, Miwatj



### What are the key governance and management strengths that have allowed Miwatj to maintain and increase its workforce?

Good governance and increased workforce are definitely related. People want to work for an organisation that is credible and achieving. We don't talk about what should be done to empower Yolngu or improve health, we practice it. Health service delivery at Miwatj is our daily job, but the thing that will make the biggest difference in health outcomes for Aboriginal people is control of their lives, capability to function in both worlds, Yolngu and balanda, and have resources to ensure that they can live a productive life. Children will see how their parents are benefitting from the cycle of work and how they benefit from being a child of that person. They know that education is what leads to work.

We have a very large Yolngu workforce. When you have people that are biologically related and you employ 5 per cent of the population your delivery is going to be very culturally appropriate. Service delivery by Yolngu is important because they understand each other, however the clinical and medical standards remain in a western best-practice model. We have two Yolngu in our leadership group so right through the whole organisation Yolngu people control both strategic and operational matters. And that's why I think a lot of people choose to work here.

Our governance model is pretty much western, with a constitution that is all about accountability and transparency. But the way we practice it is in a Yolngu cultural way. Decisions are made according to cultural norm.

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Eddie Mulholland, CEO, Miwatj

### How many Aboriginal people work at Miwatj?

We employ about 80 Aboriginal people, with around five Aboriginal staff not from this region, the rest are Yolngu. In Yirrkala and Galiwin'ku, we employ roughly 5 per cent of the population, it might even be a bit more. There is always a very high ratio of people that are involved in Miwatj's work or board.

### What jobs are Aboriginal people employed in?

Right across from Aboriginal health practitioners to community workers, to administration, human resources, and healthy lifestyle programs. I believe we have the only Yolngu clinic manager in the whole of the NT.

*“Right through the whole organisation Yolngu people control both strategic and operational matters”*

Eddie Mulholland, CEO, Miwatj

### How are emerging Aboriginal leaders supported?

We do a lot of succession planning. We send emerging leaders to the AMSANT leadership program every year, have internal mentoring mechanisms, and place promising staff in different sections of the organisation from administration to HR to finance, and so on, so that they understand the whole operation.

### Do you have any advice for other organisations wanting to build their Aboriginal workforce?

Success comes from strong leadership reliant on trust between the board and the CEO. You've got to trust each other, work with each other, and believe in each other. You have to build a strong organisational culture around your values, and ensure it runs through the whole organisation. We interview and select people with values that match Miwatj's values.

And lastly, run the organisation as if it is a private business. Always look for value for money and get the best outcomes you can. I lead by example. I only spend Miwatj's money as I would spend my own and I expect staff to do the same because the money is for Yolngu services.

Interviewer: Sarah Lacy, Aboriginal Governance Management Program (AGMP)

Miwatj is a participant in the AGMP's CEO/Board Network