

**Traditional Aboriginal Medicine and Medical Practices in Newcastle and local surrounding areas during the Precolonization period**



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Ngurrabul language group of the  
Gamilaroi Nation

# Acknowledgement of Country & Contributors

## **Acknowledgment of Country & Elders**

- Awabakal People
- Elders and Community

## **Acknowledgement of Knowledge**

- Passing of knowledge has been discussed with local elders and members of the community
- Honored to have permission and share information on a public forum

## **Acknowledgement of Contributors**

- **Dr Ross Kerridge** – Senior Anesthetist (JHH)
- **Uncle Bill Smith** – Local Elder
- **William Fisher** – Awabakal Leader
- Miromaa Aboriginal Technology and Language Centre
- **Daryn McKenny** – Awabakal Leader
- **Dr Gianni Di Gravo** – University Archivist



# The Presenter

## Dr Erika Chapman-Burgess – B.Med

- PGY1 Junior Medical Officer/Intern
- Originally from Glen Innes in New England Area
- Ngurrabul and Gamilaroi Language groups
- Quintuplet – Only Indigenous set of Quintuplets in Australia
- First Doctor of my family, first Aboriginal doctor of my school and town





# Introduction to Traditional Aboriginal Medicine

- Aboriginal Australia - Evidently known as one of the oldest cultures in the world, > 60,000 years
- Traditional Medicine Incorporates all elements of the land being that of physical property, but Aboriginal Medicine also includes spiritual healing
- The Aboriginal Pharmacopoeia
- Australian plants are quite unique and impressive



# Traditional Aboriginal Medicine in Australia

- Traditional Aboriginal Medicine in Australia – What can we learn?
- Living with the land
- Passing of knowledge to one another and trans-generational
- A diverse culture meant different medical practices varied amongst different language groups
- There is a large loss of Traditional Medicine knowledge amongst youth in traditional communities

# The Aboriginal Pharmacopeia - The Traditional MIMS

= The traditional form of MiMs, collection of native-based plants and flora, common uses and then distribution on where this medical practice was most common or distribution in Australia  
Prior to White Settlement, Aboriginal people suffered from minor illnesses or mostly cutaneous complaints

- Death = Mostly the result of Injury (hunting or fighting), hardly from elderly age

## **Common Sources of Medicine:**

- Plant based: Leaves, bark, twigs, leaf smoke, flowers, nectar sap
- Animal Based: Animal hides, animal fat, animal products

**Effects of Colonization:** Adaption of Medicine

**MIMS**  
100% pure knowledge



# Healers of Central Australia

**Ngangkari** = is the term used to refer to Anangu Aboriginal traditional healers – men/women from Pitjantjatjara, Yankytjatjara and Ngaanyatjarra Aboriginal language groups from Central Australia.

- Traditional doctors and healers
- Ngangkari's train Ngangkari's
- Become Ngangkari's because another Ngangkari has given them power

## **Practice Methods:**

1. Blowing Breath
2. Spiritual Healing – Kurunpa
3. Suction Method
4. Massage and Wound Healing
5. Bone Manipulation
6. Sacred Tools

**Two way Health Care Model in Northern Territory**



# NEWCASTLE NSW

An aerial photograph of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia. The image shows a dense urban area with various buildings, including residential blocks and commercial structures. The city is situated along a coastline with waves breaking on the shore. The sky is clear and blue.

**welcome  
to Newcastle**





**LOCAL LANGUAGE GROUPS OF THE HUNTER  
NSW**



# Local Aboriginal Language Groups of Newcastle and the Hunter

## **Awabakal** – (Awab-a-kaal)

= Territory extends from the Hunter River to the southern extremities of Lake Macquarie/Tuggerah Lake in the south and western boundary to the Sugarloaf Ranges and Watagan Mountains.

Within Awabakal consists **4 clans**: Pambalong/Swamp District, Ash Land, Kurunbong and Lake Macquarie.

**Wonnarua** – Most of the Hunter Valley region, and boundaries sit north above Awabakal from the Upper Hunter River and west towards Wollombi

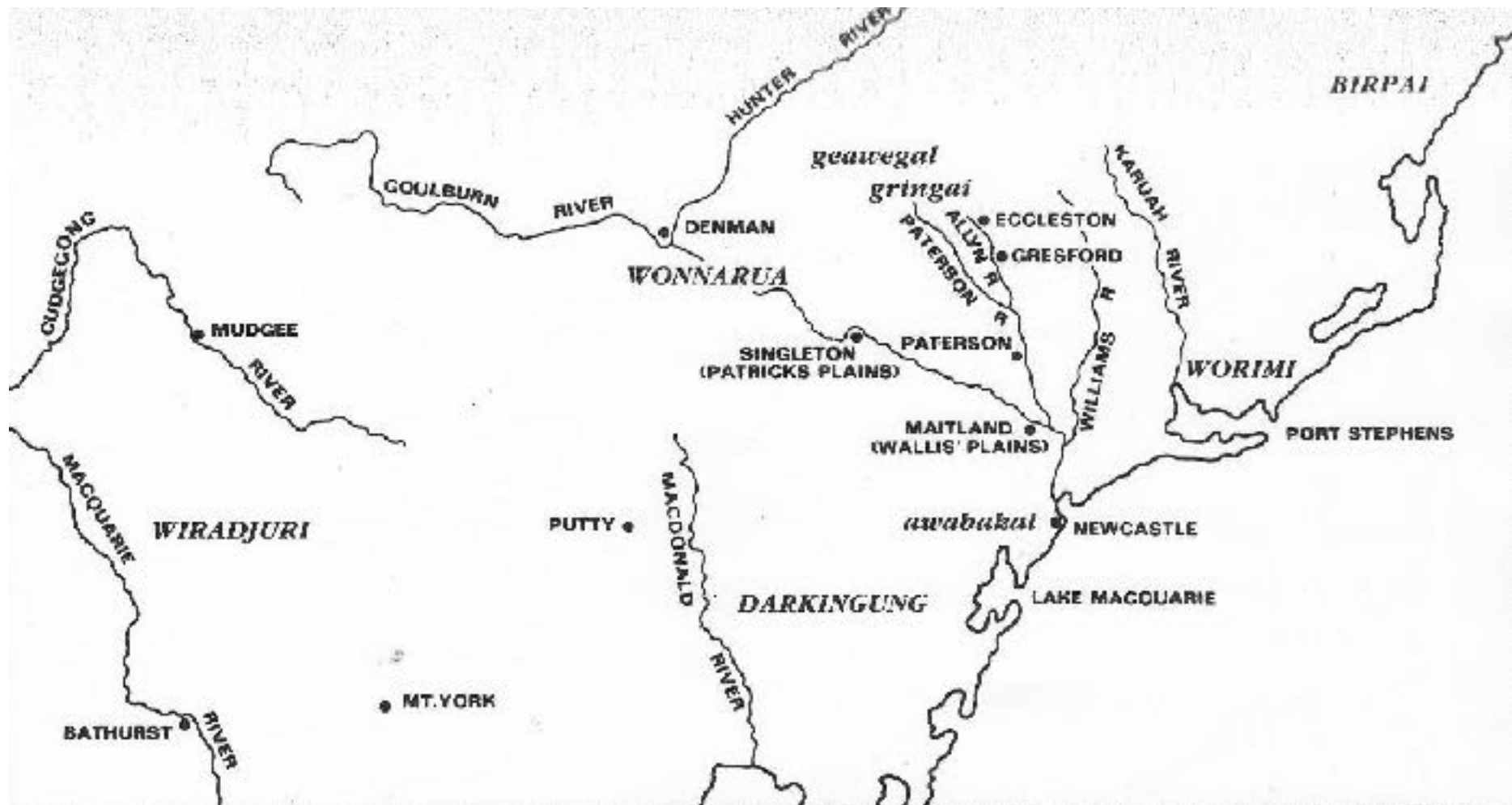
Clans: Gaewe-gal, Gringai and Awaba-gal

**Worimi** – Language group resides in the eastern Port Stephens and Great Lakes region

**Darkinjung** – Of the Wyong and Gosford shire, boundaries extend from the Hawkesbury River in the South, Lack Macquarie in the north and McDonald River/Wollombi to the West.



# Language Groups of the Hunter Valley



# Traditional Aboriginal Medicine in the Hunter and Local Newcastle Area

- Newcastle was one of the first regional towns settled in NSW
- First contact occurred around September 1790
- Coal
- First Aboriginal Mission
- Settlement in the Newcastle and Hunter region led to significant decrease in the Aboriginal Population
- Literature is limited
- Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld, the English Colonist
- Knowledge passed down through Elders



# Local Practices

## Source - Aborigines of the Hunter Region (1985)

- Few Aboriginal people reached an elderly age in the area
- Common causes of Death
- Known remedies: Mostly gums, saps and barks

**Localised Pain:** *Eucalyptus* Extract

**Superficial Bleeding:** Application of clay, earth or cobwebs

**Giants Stinging Tree (*Dendrocnide excelsa*)** - Excruciating sting after immediate contact with skin. Local Aboriginal people knew of a quick antidote

= Sap of a local lilly (*Blue Flax Lilly* or *Lilly Pilly Tree?*)

- Lilly was found in abundance in Gloucester area

**Psychological Medicine and Spiritual Healing:** (foreign objects & blood letting)



# Native Plants/Flora of the Hunter Valley with Medicinal Properties

- **Acacia Spp.** (*longifolia, aneura, mimososa*) : Contains Tannin
- **Eucalyptus** (*agglomerate*)
- **Native Yam** (*dioscorea transversa*)
- **Native Fig** (*Ficus coronata, rubiginosa, fraseri*)
- **Broad-leaved Paperbark** (*Malaleuca spp*)
- **Pittosporum** (*Meemeei*)
- **Syzygium spp.** (*Lilly Pilly*)
- **Native plants/flora of the Hunter Valley with Medicinal properties**





***Acacia Longifolia***  
**Wattle**



A close-up photograph of the branches of a Gum Tree, *Eucalyptus agglomerata*. The image shows several woody, brownish branches with clusters of small, green, rounded buds. The leaves are elongated and have a distinct blue-green or silvery-grey color. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting a dense canopy of similar trees.


*Eucalyptus  
agglomerata*  
Gum Tree





*Ficus Coronata*  
Native Fig





*Malaleuca species*  
Broad-leave Paperbark





*Dendrocnide excelsa*  
Giant Stinging Tree





**Syzygium Species**  
**Lilly Pilly**



# Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld (1788 – 1859)

Was a Missionary and congregational minister, born in Southward London.

- Settled in Newcastle in **May 1825**, and then moved to a station at Bahtahbah (Belmont) in 1826 and eventually to Ebenezer (Toronto)
- For 10 years he published reports and language studies with the assistance of a local tribal leader Biraban, who passed on his language and Threlkeld was able to learn the dialect
- Threlkeld became an interpreter for the local language group
- His work is highly renown and considered as landmarks in Aboriginal cultural studies



# Murramai

Here is the quotation from Threlkeld's *An Australian Grammar* (1834) p.48:

“Murramai, the name of a round ball, about the size of a cricket-ball, which the aborigines carry in a small net suspended from their girdles of opossum yarn. The women are not allowed to see the internal part of the ball. It is used as a talisman against sickness, and it is sent from tribe to tribe for hundreds of miles, on the sea-coast and in the interior. One is now here from Moreton Bay, the interior of which a black showed me privately in my study, betraying considerable anxiety lest any female should see its contents. After he had unrolled many yards of woollen cord, made from the fur of the opossum, the contents proved to be a quartz-like substance the size of a pigeon's egg. He allowed me to break it and retain a part. It is transparent, like white sugar candy. The natives **swallow any small crystalline particles that crumble off**, as a preventive of sickness. It scratches glass, and does not effervesce with acids. From another specimen, the stone appears to be agate, of a milky hue, semi-pellucid, and it strikes fire. The vein from which it appears to have been broken



# Blood Letting

**Another direct quote from Threlkeld's Journal, May 1826 describing the process of Blood Letting:**

“Went among the native who encamp't around our dwelling saw two were ill, administered to their wants. Perceived an old woman busy employed in dipping the end of a cord into a vessel of water – the vessel is simply a piece of bark tied up at both ends – went nearer to ascertain the nature of this performance, observed a young girl very ill lying on the ground, round her waist was twisted a cord made of opossum hair one end of which was what the old woman had in her hand dipping it into the water and rubbing the part she held between both hands stretched upon her under lip, the friction abraded the skin and blood appeared to flow rather copiously from her mouth into the vessel of water before her ... they suppose that the illness or the cause of it passes through the cord from the sick person in the blood which is spit from the operator's mouth.”

# Summary

## In Summary:

- Traditional Aboriginal Medicine is one of the oldest Medicines on Earth (sacred and unique)
- What can we learn from Aboriginal Medicine as Doctors?
- Care is universal
- My personal journey