



A Guide for Mothers and Families

First Australian Birthing Practises
in Gaimariagal Country





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NSLHD First Australian Birthing Practises in Gaimariagal Country: A Guide For Mothers And Families
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Foreword

I am delighted to present to you the Northern Sydney Local Health District (NSLHD) Wiyanga: First Australian Birthing Practises in Gaimariagal Country: A Guide for Mothers and Families.

Wiyanga has been written to offer information regarding cultural birthing practises, not only for First Australian women (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders), but for all women, professional and patients who have a need to learn about Aboriginal cultural birthing practises some 60,000 years old. These rites are still being practised today. The authors acknowledge the partnerships with all key stakeholders including those services within NSLHD.

I would particularly like to acknowledge Susan Moylan-Coombs and Eliza Pross from The Gaimaragal Group, NSLHD Network Manager for Midwifery Practice Cathy Adams and the NSLHD Aboriginal Health Service for their commitment and hard work in developing this resource and for providing the very best holistic health care to First Australian women in NSLHD.

I am confident that this resource will deliver the best quality holistic health care information to First Australians and NSLHD will be the leader in the delivery of accessible, equitable, high quality and culturally appropriate holistic health care to First Australians in NSLHD.

If you seek any further assistance with this document, please contact the NSLHD Aboriginal Health Service on **(02) 9012 9017** or email **NSLHD-AboriginalHealth@health.nsw.gov.au**



Dr. Andrew Montague

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Northern Sydney Local Health District

Background

Wiyanga is an initiative of the Northern Sydney Local Health District through funding provided by the NSW State Government.

The project has been undertaken by The Gaimaragal Group, a First Australian Company who works on a range of projects nationally to improve the health and wellbeing of First Australians.

Gaimariagal Country is an area that extends from the North Shore of Sydney Harbour, to the Lane Cove River in the West, and to the Hawkesbury River in the North. Most of the public hospitals within the Northern Sydney Local Health District are located on Gaimariagal Land.

'Wiyanga' is a Gaimariagal word meaning 'mother'. The project is primarily about supporting First Australian mothers and families through their pregnancy and child birth journey: from conception through to post-natal care. It is about recognising the cultural values surrounding birth and supporting people to make decisions and choices that are right for them.

The project also offers an opportunity for all mothers and families to access some of the cultural knowledge we hold as First Australians in relation to birthing and broader cultural practises. This knowledge and the associated birthing practises are available to all women.

The cultural knowledge used for the Wiyanga Project has been provided with permission by MinMia, a Wiradjuri woman, Elder and holder of Womens' Lore. MinMia has had a long-term relationship with women and extended families living in the Gaimariagal homelands and provides cultural teachings to a national and international audience.

Reproduction of the cultural knowledge contained in this document can only take place with the explicit permission of the cultural knowledge holder, MinMia. All requests for use or reproduction of information must be made by contacting The Gaimaragal Group at susan@gaimaragal.com.au.

Introduction to this resource

Australia's First Peoples are a diverse group of individuals and communities and language groups whose ancestry originates from the oldest surviving living culture on the planet.

Wiyanga seeks to provide cultural information that captures birthing practises from the perspective of a Lore Woman. The intention is to empower women to make informed choices and decisions around their own pregnancy and child birth experiences and encourages them to embrace and practise their culture in ways defined as right for them, their families and their babies.

When you have your baby

The placenta carries the 'Miwi (spirit or soul) Print'- your baby's spiritual journey. When a baby is born vaginally, the physical pressure that comes from the baby travelling through the birth canal, pushes blood back up into the placenta. As soon as the baby takes its first breath, the oxygen that travels back into the placenta triggers a series of 'exchanges' of information that occurs between the baby and the placenta.

The first breath activates the 'brain seed', a pocket of chemicals or materials that go to the base of the baby's brain. This is vitally important for the baby's brain development. It sets their brain up for its cognitive development and impacts on behavioural and learning capacities.

Once this is activated, information is passed back through the cord from the baby into the placenta. The information is that the 'brain seed' has been received. This then triggers the 'Miwi seed' or 'spiritual journey seed' – this 'lights up' the spiritual journey print that is on the placenta and feeds it back into the baby's Miwi. This information goes back and forward, effectively ensuring all the information is there and activated.

This is what is happening while the cord is pulsing and why it's so important not to cut or clamp the cord until it finishes pulsing. If it is clamped or cut before it stops pulsing, this information doesn't get exchanged and activated properly.

It is very important to understand that first and foremost, the most important thing is that the mother's and baby's health and wellbeing is prioritised. Sometimes things can happen during birth that mean that the cord has to be cut immediately. When this happens, remember it is OK. You have to make sure the health of the mother and baby is looked after. You can conduct a re-birthing ceremony (see Birthing Ceremony information).

Now that the Miwi Journey Print is activated on the placenta, it is important it is planted in Nungeena-tya (mother earth). This is what you do in the Birthing Ceremony.



If you have a caesarean birth

Sometimes it is necessary for a baby to be born by caesarean. Remember the most important thing is to ensure the health and wellbeing of the mother and the baby. Now caesarean births 'slow down' the exchange of information through the cord, as described above. This is because when the baby doesn't get the pressure that a baby born through the birth canal gets, the blood isn't pushed back into the placenta as fast. It just means that the whole process is slowed down.

The nature of a caesarean birth presents the medical team with a range of other considerations given it is an operation and this usually means a quicker cutting of the cord. If this occurs retain the placenta, as per the vaginal birth to plant in Nungeena-tya during the Birthing Ceremony.

Your baby's Totem

Under the Lore every living thing: every plant, animal, insect has its essence. Everything is perfectly imperfect and has strengths and weaknesses that make up the whole. Nothing is better or worse than anything else, no essence is higher or lower, they all have light and shadows.

There are tribal and personal Totems. Tribal Totems relate to where you came into the world, they are based on your physical birthing and conception place. The Totems of Gaimariagal Country are the Black Raven, the White Cockatoo, the Rock Wallaby and the Gecko. Biami (the Creator) formed the Tribal Totem system to ensure that every living thing would be protected and cared for by the group of people whose Tribal Totem that creature was. That way every living thing would be protected. You can't eat or in any way harm your Totem, in fact you have to do everything in your power to care for and protect your Totem. That ensures the continuity of the species.

Then you have your personal Totem. Your personal Totem is generally something that is around you all the time. As a mother you might be conscious of a creature or plant that 'shows itself' a lot during your pregnancy or something that seems to be around the child all the time. Your personal Totem chooses you. The essence and strengths that Totems carries are necessary to support you to fulfill your life journey.



Totems of Gaimariagal Country:

White Cockatoo: The White Cockatoo is ‘the messenger’ or carrier of information. When you see them, they are telling you that there is some news coming that will affect you. White Cockatoos are very intelligent, they like languages and can actually pick up human speech. They live for a long time and can fly long distances without water, they are resilient. However they can do a lot of damage with their mouths. If your Totem is a White Cockatoo, you need to be conscious of potentially having a ‘destructive mouth’ for example being a gossip or being ‘toxic’ with words.

Gecko: The Gecko brought courage into the world and is about balancing courage and fear. When you see them they are giving you a message about being courageous, or looking at why you are fearful. If your Totem is a Gecko you can be very courageous, and others may rely on you for that courage. However you can also experience debilitating fear.

Raven: The Raven represents the ‘eyes of the creator’. They are observant, aware and ‘watch’ very carefully what is going on in the physical and metaphorical sense. Because they ‘see’ they are very generous and responsive to the needs of others. However if your Totem is the Raven, you can be prone to giving too much of yourself to others. This can leave a Raven ‘needy’ as they have sacrificed their own needs for those of ‘the collective’.

Rock Wallaby: The Rock Wallaby, like the Kangaroo represents ‘moving forward’. Being physically unable to go backwards, the Wallaby encourages us to ‘live in the now’ and focus on the ‘hope of tomorrow’. If your Totem is the Wallaby you are someone that doesn’t get caught up in past events or in re-hashing past failings or mistakes. You are someone who always looks to the future. However you also need to be conscious of recognising when past events or experiences might be holding you back and preventing you from moving forward.

Other Totems:

Koala: The Koala is the peacemaker. They are very calm and laid back and are ‘dreamers’ in every sense of the word. They are also very messy and have little regard for tidiness. If your Totem is a Koala you are a good mediator and are looked upon to calm situations. However you can also be placid and laid back to the point where you struggle to ‘get moving’ or motivated. Koalas can have a short attention span and need stimulation to remain engaged.

Butterfly: The Butterfly represents transformation and change. Butterflies, through their physical capacity to transform and evolve are highly adaptive. People whose Totem is a Butterfly are often seen by others as very interesting and flexible. They may take on diverse jobs or recreational activities and are very good at dealing with change. However, if your Totem is a Butterfly you need to be careful about getting ‘stuck’ in your ‘cocoon’. Butterflies who experience trauma or severe betrayal (for example) can retreat to their cocoon and find it difficult to re-emerge.



Birthing Ceremony

As we have said every person on the planet has a unique Miwi Print on his/her placenta that holds the instructions for their life's journey. So when you are born it is important that your placenta is buried into the earth, into Nungeena-tya on its own. This anchors your journey and your Miwi Print waits there until you 'spill seed' (reach puberty) at which stage Nungeena recognises you and assists in guiding your spiritual journey. The placenta nourishes the earth and we are honouring Nungeena-tya by placing the responsibility of our child's journey with her. This is why the Birthing Ceremony is so important.

Traditionally, our placentas would be buried near a tree of significance for our tribe. We would know the major songlines of our tribe, our child would have our tribal Totem and we would know their personal songline and their personal Totem. By having all of this knowledge, we would inherently know the essences of all of the trees we might want to plant the placenta near. A tree would be then chosen because it had the spiritual essence that we decided was the one to give to our child. It was a giving of the gift of another essence and another strength for the child to carry through life.

In this contemporary setting we encourage women to choose a plant or tree to plant over the placenta. The essence of whatever plant you choose will influence the child, so you need to put a lot of thought into which plant you choose. Remember every living thing has an essence with strengths and weaknesses, light and shade. What you plant can't make the child's journey easier but what you do is offer a gift of what you think would be of benefit to her/him. Let's look at some of the plants and essences you may want to think about.

Whichever essence is chosen, it is then the job of the parent and other significant people in the child's life to educate and 'grow them' to understand and harness their strengths and recognise and work on their weaknesses.

The Birthing Ceremony was traditionally carried out by the Grandmothers with Aunts and other women. It involved a number of cultural practices including a smoking ceremony (with Sacred Gum leaves), painting with Ochre and singing of sacred songs. Most importantly though the placenta was planted under the selected plant.

You can bury your baby's placenta under the plant as described here. However if you are living in Gaimariagal Country and your baby is born here, ask your midwife or doctor to connect you with the NSLHD Aboriginal Health Service. They will provide you with information about when members of the local First Australian community may be able to undertake a group Birthing Ceremony.



Plant blessings

Grevillea: The grevillea is a very strong plant. It is able to take significant life forces: its branches can literally bend to the ground. The fruit of the grevillea makes a sweet nectar that attracts creatures to it and in return the creatures pollinate the plant. If a grevillea is pushed to breaking point however they can snap at the trunk. If this happens, it takes a grevillea a long time to recover. Choosing a grevillea to plant over the placenta gifts the child flexibility, resilience and friendship around them. The child will be flexible and giving, however if they are 'pushed to breaking point' may find it harder than others to recover and regenerate.

Midgen Berry: The Midgen Berry is a shrub that grows close to the ground. As such, the plant nurtures smaller creatures that may not have access to other trees and plants. Choosing a Midgen Berry to plant over the placenta gifts the child with the ability to see and validate creatures that may be overlooked by others. They will be nurturers. However, in doing so the Midgen Berry and the Midgen Berry child can be prone to give too much of themselves, particularly to creatures who may not 'give back' in return.

Purple Lilly Pilly: Lilly Pilly's are very strong, resilient and independent. However as young trees they have a vulnerability and can be damaged in their early lives. Choosing a Lilly Pilly to plant over the placenta gifts the child strength, independence and resilience. However, they can be more vulnerable as a younger child to the greed or demands of others.

Bottle Brush: The Bottle Brush is another plant that through its flowers' nectar attracts a range of other creatures, in doing so the creatures pollinate the plant representing a great capacity for symbiotic or mutually beneficial relationships. When a Bottle Brush reaches maturity it is a very strong and resilient plant. However when it is young, it is vulnerable, its young branches are prone to snap easily. Choosing a Bottle Brush to plant over the placenta, gifts the child with the ability to grow healthy, mutually beneficial relationships and particularly in later life have great endurance and strength. However in the early years, Bottle Brush children can be vulnerable and 'easily wounded'.

When you think about the plant you want to bury the placenta under, be conscious of the plants that are native and abundant in the area you will be planting it to maintain the integrity of the local ecosystem within the region.



When your baby leaves

It is a really hard time for mothers and families if their baby leaves during or directly prior to birth (stillbirth). Our traditional belief is that the baby's spirit left. While this results in the death of the physical body, we believe the baby's choice to leave, is for a very important purpose.

Babies whose Miwis leave do this for a reason. This perceived 'sacrifice' of a physical life, is often for a purpose which could be unity (to unite others) or some other healing for people whose life it affects. It is an incredibly sad time for everyone but it's important to know in our belief system the sacrifice of this physical life is not accidental, it is absolutely for a reason that the Miwi has chosen during their time in the spirit world. The fact that they have left, means they have fulfilled their purpose for this journey. That's hard to take as a mother or family living in this physical world. But it is important to know and to validate the journey that has been fulfilled. That's why we say they leave, rather than die.

When a baby is born and declared stillborn if it's possible and the mother chooses put the baby onto the mother's bare chest. If it's practical and safe to do so, also leave the placenta attached. Keep the baby here with the mother for a period of time defined by the mother. Retain the placenta where possible or retain a piece of the cord, to plant it in Nungeena-tya and conduct the Birthing Ceremony.

What if I don't have the placenta?

There are many reasons why you may not have the baby's placenta. This may be because for a medical reason during the birth process it was removed or it may have been taken away before you asked to retain it or you are reading this for the first time now and have had previous children without having this knowledge!

It is possible to conduct re-birthing ceremonies. If it is a new baby, keep as much of the placenta as you can. Or you can retain a piece of the cord, there will be a piece still attached to the baby that 'falls off' during the first weeks of the baby's life.

If it is an older child (or even an adult for that matter), a re-birthing ceremony can be conducted. For information about this contact the NSLHD Aboriginal Health Service.



Your rights

It's important that you know that you have the right to have your cultural needs and preferences respected and supported when you are having your baby and receiving care through the Northern Sydney Local Health District. You have the right to:

- 🌀 **Request referral** to the NSLHD Aboriginal Health Service at any time. They can come and meet with you and discuss any needs or concerns you have
- 🌀 **Ask for information**, and for information to be provided in formats of your choice. Following this, you have the right to decline any intervention or treatment
- 🌀 **Practise your culture** in ways defined by you. This may include cultural requests contained in this booklet, and/or other cultural practises important to you;
- 🌀 **Request to keep** your placenta and take it home with you
- 🌀 **Request people** of your choice to attend the birth of your baby
- 🌀 **Feel safe and supported** in your decision making. If you don't, ask to speak to the NSLHD Aboriginal Health Service.

You can contact the **NSLHD Aboriginal Health Service on (02) 9462 9017** or by email

NSLHD-AboriginalHealth@health.nsw.gov.au

We acknowledge Dennis Foley for his Gaimariagal Cultural knowledge. Thank you also to mums Amy and Bec and baby Oliver for being part of this publication. the Gaimaragal Group acknowledges Amy Hannaford for her photographic contributions.





We wish for you and
your family a safe
and happy journey...



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