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An American/Australian’s Observations: Wellness in Australia Compared to the United States (April 2013) (/blogpost/922994/161967/An-American-Australian-s-Observations-Wellness-in-Australia-Compared-to-the-United-States-April-2013)

Posted By **NWI**, Tuesday, April 2, 2013

Updated: Tuesday, April 2, 2013

By **John W. Travis, MD, MPH**

My Background

Like some other early wellness doctors, Halbert Dunn and Bill Hettler, I was born in Ohio. With that birthright, I got my early modeling of wellness from the 2,500 people of Bluffton, Ohio, in the 1940s. After completing my MD in Boston in the '60s, a preventive medicine residency at Johns Hopkins, I opened the first wellness center in the United States in 1975. Since 2000, I've lived more than half of each year in Australia—becoming a dual citizen in 2005. I firmly believe that the currency of wellness is connection. I came upon this belief because I didn't experience the birthright of mammalian-programmed connection with my parents (Elaine Sullivan taught me early on that our gifts come from our wounds). This wasn't unusual. Normative abuse practices of Western culture were just becoming popular in those days: hospital births and the separations promulgated by Dr. Spock—sleeping alone in cribs, four-hour bottle feedings, playpens, baby carriages, and circumcision. At least Spock reversed himself on circumcision before he died!

However, some of this disconnection was made up for during my formative years in Bluffton, just before television destroyed so much of the social capital that was created through the many meetings and projects a small-town culture fostered. These were ice cream socials on Thursday nights in the summer when Church Street was closed off and we all sat around eating and talking. Many groups met in the evenings, from purely social gatherings like bridge clubs (which always meant treats afterward when it was at our house), to service projects with the Scouts or Lions Club. Judd Allen gave me a copy of *Bowling Alone* years ago, which documents this massive loss of social capital and hence a lowering of societal wellness. I lament this loss and, having experienced it as a child, am committed to reestablishing it.

Much of my work in infant wellness, beginning in the early '90s, was inspired through healing my own wounds, thus you know my bias. If we teach what we need to learn, it's no accident my career has been in wellness.

Perhaps because of my small-town roots, for the past eight years I've chosen to live for part of each year in a very progressive small town on the eastern-most tip of the Australian continent—Mullumbimby, New South Wales (near Byron Bay). Here there is a level of self-awareness and ecological concern similar to many places in Northern California, so my observations are doubtless skewed from what I'd likely see in more conservative areas of Australia.

Comparison of the United States and Australia

So how is it different in Australia? Using categories from my Wellness Wheel as a framework, I'd say in many ways it's both different and, yet, not that different.



Self-responsibility and love

Self-responsibility in government is evident in Byron Shire (the "county" I live in) because the elected councilors are largely Green Party members, and a growing constituency of Greens is now found in state and federal parliaments. (Australia's electoral system allows voters to rank candidates so that casting a vote for a lesser known candidate does not weaken the chances of a favored major party's win, like it does in the United States.) I laud Kevin Rudd, the leader of the Labor Party that swept into power a year before the United States elected Obama. As Prime Minister, one of his first acts was to apologize to the original peoples of the land for the atrocities of the invasion in a nationally televised event watched by millions in February 2008.

One difference does stand out, though. Australia protects infant boys from the surgical removal of three-fourths of the most sensitive tissue on their body—done without effective anesthesia. Though once similar to the U.S. circumcision rates of nearly 80%, Australia's infant circumcision rates plummeted in the 1970s. Now, like all the other Anglophone countries, except the United States, it remains under 15%. The U.S. rate is still over 50%, but dropping rapidly.

This brutal, unnecessary genital modification remains one of the largest human rights violations on the planet—yet, being a \$2 billion/year industry in United States, it's hard to stop. Unfortunately, the decision to cease this practice in Australia was due to financial reasons, when their respective national health services were established, as did the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa. Australia gets my kudos, but I'd be more enthusiastic had it resulted from public awareness and an outcry over the misinformation that has been touted since the late 1800s when circumcision was promoted to discourage masturbation.

Another example is Transition Towns and the shift to local economies (see the award-winning documentary "The Economics of Happiness," downloadable from TheEconomicsofHappiness.org for a small fee). I'm proud to say it was produced by

Helena Norberg-Hodge, a Mullumbimby resident (also a friend of Prince Charles). I recently offered a workshop at her second international conference—connecting corporate dysfunction with decreasing infant wellness.

Breathing

In Australia, smoking rates have declined dramatically and appear to me to be similar to those in the United States, although asthma has similarly climbed. I believe the asthma increase will eventually be proven to result from the increasing levels of insult to the developing immune system from early cord clamping, excessive vaccinations, and exposure to antigens from cow's milk and formula rather than the human milk we were biologically programmed to thrive on for the first few years (see aTLC.org).

Eating

Australia is quickly catching up with America in obesity, although the distinctive Australian beer belly dramatically stands out, given their higher consumption of alcohol. Australia's food supply is similarly dominated by huge multinational corporations focusing on profits, not health, and packaged "food" laced with Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). Fortunately there is now a growing local food movement—part of increased localizing of the area's economy.

Moving

Fitness levels appear to be no better than in the United States. (It's nearly always the worst area in the Wellness Inventory.)

Feeling

I don't think Australians' ability to be conscious of their feelings and express them constructively is any better than the poor abilities of the American mainstream culture. This is a really hard one many of my friends and I continually work on.

Playing and Working

Australia is far ahead of the United States, with much longer built-in vacation times for employees, shorter workweeks for the salaried, and a culture that takes weekends seriously. ("Put another shrimp on the barbie" is a very real phenomenon.)

Communicating

I'm struck by the number of primetime TV shows that consist of a panel women and men discussion interesting topics—often with a lot of humor—completely ad lib (or so it appears). This is in sharp contrast with the more typical American scripted TV dramas.

Intimacy

An Australian phenomenon I don't see in the United States is that many men have a backyard "shed" that serves both as their "cave" for alone-time, and a men's social hub.

Finding Meaning

For increasing numbers of Australians, there is a much greater awareness of the worldview of the original Australians, which conceptually is a big stretch for Westerners. This is captured beautifully in a Youtube version of the film "Kanyini," narrated by "Uncle" Bob Randall, one of the elders of Uluru, formerly known as Ayer's Rock. Many public meetings now open with an honoring of the original caretakers.

Australia seems to have gone from a much less conscious colonization of aboriginal lands (no treaties were signed because Aborigines were not considered human until late in the last century), to a much more inclusive understanding of a worldview that is far more sustainable than our Western myth of unlimited growth and progress.

Transcending

This refers to spiritual pursuits beyond ego concerns and is different from religion. Awareness seems to be increasing in both countries, for example, through the Mindfulness movement that has taken meditation out of the realm of Eastern religions to a mainstream acceptance as a valid wellness enhancement.

Summary

These observations are by no means objective or conclusive, but do indicate some differences between the two cultures, probably based in part by the relative newness of Australian society. Europeans had been settling North America for more than 200 years before the first prisoners arrived in Australia. There is also a different mindset and cultural heritage of settlers who came for different reasons (by choice, or not) and from very different periods of time. There are many deep-rooted cultural differences that I'm only beginning to appreciate after all these years of living in a different land.



*John W. Travis, MD, MPH, specialized in preventive medicine at Johns Hopkins University, founded the first wellness center in the United States (1975), and co-authored several books including the best-selling *Wellness Workbook*. He is probably best known for his *Illness-Wellness Continuum*, which distinguishes wellness as a separate paradigm from the treatment paradigm.*

He is a proponent of full-spectrum wellness, which embraces body, mind, emotions, and spirit, encompassing the entire lifespan and connecting all aspects of environment—infant and adult wellness, community wellness, and global systems wellness.

He teaches "Wellness Assessment and Health Analysis" in the online Master of Wellness Program at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

His current interest is alerting the public about a phenomenon he named male postpartum abandonment syndrome (MPAS). This frequently occurs when a poorly bonded man (most men in the United States, according to Travis) becomes a father. Old, unconscious childhood wounds are unwittingly reactivated and coupled with the impossible demands of the nuclear family—a creation by our corporate-ruled, industrial culture—leads to men feeling useless and unworthy. Thus MPAS drives the hidden epidemic of disappearing dads—both those who leave physically, as well as the vast majority who leave emotionally.

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