The risk of disrupted governance in remote communities because of the pandemic

By Dr Damien Howard and Jody Barney

The poor health of many in remote communities makes them very vulnerable if the virus reaches them. It is going to be important to maintain social isolation for a relatively long term.

This creates challenges since changes related the CO19 virus will compound the existing multiple areas of disadvantage experienced in those communities. One existing factor contributing to disadvantage in multiple ways impact on widespread hearing loss.

Past investigation (http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3766066) indicates that hearing loss among committees of management in Aboriginal controlled organisations impacts in particular ways. It makes it more difficult to understand new information that comes from outside agencies. In the past these difficulties were managed by face to face social processes. Those in the group with the best English, hearing and literacy help others understand what is sought to be communicated. The face to face social dynamics acted to moderate the potentially damaging impact hearing loss could have on other board members.

The current situation is that there is a huge increase in rapidly changing information that needs to be understood and acted on. But
social distancing and isolation means that the kinds of face to face social support described above will mostly not happen now.

It is critically important that those wishing to provide information and to work with those decision makers in remote communities, do so in ways to maximise that information being understood and acted on. Those communicating from outside need to know how to structure phone, video and written communications in ways information can be best understood by those in remote communities, as well as how to foster ongoing discussion.

The 2017 AMA health report recommended that ‘hearing loss informed communication training be undertaken by all those working with Aboriginal people’. The changes around the CO19 Virus mean this recommendation is now even more urgent. Otherwise poor communication outcomes will cost lives.

Jody and I have each worked in the area of Indigenous communication for 30 years. We would like to work with agencies that want to improve communication with people in remote communities, as well as communication within governance processes. Both Jody (who is a Deaf Indigenous Community Consultant) and myself have each worked for 30 years in ways to improve communications affected by widespread hearing loss among Aboriginal people.