Good morning. Thank you for the welcome to country. It's a pleasure to be here to celebrate Lowitja Institute's 20 years of achievements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, especially on this day, the International Day of Indigenous Peoples.

I’d like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri People, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

I also welcome all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, from near and far, who are here for this event; other distinguished research contributors to Indigenous health; and my fellow Parliamentarians.

And, in particular of course, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue, who is a venerable institution in herself.

It is 20 years since Dr Lowitja became the chair of the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health when it opened in Darwin.

It was special then – because its core partners included two Aboriginal health services, and because of the remarkable woman who led it.

The CRC brought together researchers, government and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector for research focused on five priority areas, which went well beyond the traditional field of “health”. These included:

- Indigenous education;
- health resources and service delivery;
- public health;
- communication and information; and
- biomedicine.
As it evolved, it led the way to a welcome new approach to Indigenous health research - research that works with Indigenous communities, reflecting Indigenous priorities, undertaken by Indigenous people.

The CRC is now hosted by the Lowitja Institute, also known as the National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research.

It is the only research organisation in Australia with a sole focus on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Institute has led the way by connecting communities and researchers with service deliverers and policy makers.

This model is fundamental to the development of informed and effective Indigenous health policies.

We need and value solid evidence, which is why the Australian Government Department of Health is a partner of the Institute, along with 22 other agencies including Indigenous organisations, universities, research institutions and other government departments.

Research has never been more important and this is reflected in the Turnbull Government’s 2017 Budget, with $52.9 million over four years for a new, whole-of-government research and evaluation strategy for policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

This includes $10 million over three years to create an Indigenous Research Fund, managed by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

This research fund will be devoted to projects which inform Indigenous policy, and will complement the important work of the Lowitja Institute.

The Institute’s pioneering role has helped pave the way for more indigenous-led projects.

Last month, I was proud to launch the new Central Australia Academic Health Science Centre.

This is a consortium of 11 partners, led by the Aboriginal community controlled health service sector, and is devoted to projects that will make rapid, practical improvements in Indigenous health.

It’s appropriate and important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people take ownership of the research and review of programs and services for Aboriginal health, just as it is essential for them to be involved in the design and development of improvements.

The true value of research is in its capacity to effect change – to make a real impact for indigenous children, their mothers, fathers, grandparents and broader families and communities.

And change is what we need.
This year marks a decade since the Council of Australian Governments set targets across education, employment and health to Close the Gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians, including closing the gap in life expectancy by 2031.

The Turnbull Government is committed to closing the gap; and while some important measures are on-track, we must accelerate change if we are to meet the deadlines.

As the Prime Minister has said, the way forward is working together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, at all levels of government and business.

It’s also very clear that to improve health, we have to take a holistic approach.

Social and cultural factors are estimated to contribute to at least 34 per cent of the gap in life expectancy.

This sobering figure reminds us just how perceptive were the Lowitja Institute’s foundation priorities, 20 years ago.

The Turnbull Government now recognises this complexity and the need for greater collaboration with communities, across portfolios, governments and agencies.

This is why the history that traces 20 years of progress in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders health research that we are launching today, Changing the Narrative in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research, is such an important and inspiring story.

It documents the contribution made by strong, intelligent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to changing the health research paradigm in this country:

- from one where research was a matter of scientific interest, almost anthropological - done ‘to’ Indigenous people

- to a new paradigm where health research is led and done ‘by’ Indigenous researchers and reflects Indigenous peoples’ needs and priorities.

I want to reflect on a conference in Alice Springs, focussed on research for Aboriginal communities. But people presenting papers were talking about the research “done to” Aboriginal people.

I remember people getting restless, and all the indigenous Australians going out to have a meeting about what was happening in that forum, and that is where I first met Fiona Stanley, who came with us and agreed that things had to be done differently.

And that was a turning point for Australia, in terms of the NHMRC and government agencies and others, suddenly realising that the old practices were no longer appropriate, that research was not translating to change on the ground.

And what I see in the Lowitja Institute is the transition from that now, a body that gives direction, that works and walks with our people, but walks and works with all of those who
have a role to play in joining together to make an incredible difference on the ground. In keeping with our storytelling tradition the report is complemented by an e-book with audio-visual segments.

These include extended oral history interviews with some of the individuals whose vision shaped the change and bridged the gap between the western and Indigenous perspectives.

History ultimately comes down to the actions of individuals, and this is no exception.

There is a lesson for every one of us in the detail which makes this such a powerful story.

I congratulate the Lowitja Institute and all of the staff who contributed to this project.

And I look forward to the next chapter in this compelling, and crucial, story of empowerment, for a healthy future.