Australian and Torres Strait Islander Health Partnership Forums

Australian Government Department of Health Update

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Partnership Forums provide a formal way for members to engage, work together, plan and share information to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The members of each Forum include the signatories to each jurisdictional Partnership Framework Agreement:

- the Australian Government (represented by the Department of Health)
- the state or territory government (represented by the state or territory Department of Health)
- the state or territory Aboriginal health peak body

Arrangements for other guests to take part vary between the forums, and might include the Primary Health Networks and representatives of the National Indigenous Australians Agency.

The eight Partnership Forums aim to meet 3 to 4 times per year. The Australian Government Department of Health Update provides partners with the latest information about the department’s work on Indigenous health policies and programs. This includes:

- updates on projects that affect the sector or stakeholders
- tenders, evaluations and opportunities for consultation
- significant policy developments

Feel free to share this update with your networks. For more information, email Commonwealth.Partnership.Forums@health.gov.au
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New Updates

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19

The Australian Government set up the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 (the Taskforce) in early March 2020.

We co-chair the Taskforce with the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO).

Members

The Taskforce includes leaders from:

- NACCHO and their affiliates
- Aboriginal Health Services
- the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association
- the National Indigenous Australians’ Agency

The Taskforce also includes:

- state and territory public health representatives endorsed by the Communicable Diseases Network Australia
- Public Health Medical Officers and communicable disease experts

Work of the Taskforce

The Taskforce:

- delivers high-level documents endorsed by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) or National Cabinet, including:
  - guidance for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
  - essential input to the COVID-19 national guidelines
  - early aero-medical evacuation of COVID-19 cases and contacts from remote communities
- guides and advises on the Australian Government’s COVID-19 response
- ensures the response considers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and needs
- supports stakeholders working together to prepare, respond and plan at the community, regional, jurisdictional and national levels
- reports every fortnight to the AHPPC on the activities in the Management Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Populations

Find out more about the work and role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19.

As its first priority, the Taskforce developed the Management Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Populations. To protect communities and save lives, the plan:
focuses on clinical and public health actions and responses
• considers broader emphasis on communication issues and cultural and social
determinants relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Communications

Key communication messages have been translated into 15 local languages. The messages focus on:

• coronavirus awareness and prevention
• looking after your mental and physical health
• domestic and physical violence supports

A stakeholder kit is also available.

2. GP respiratory clinics

The Australian Government is investing $206.7 million to set up more than 100 GP respiratory clinics across Australia, including in rural and regional areas.

NACCHO received $6.9 million of this funding to support its Sector Support Organisations, member services and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services. These services will help to:

• coordinate Australia’s COVID-19 response
• improve culturally safe access to GP respiratory clinics and COVID-19 testing

As at 24 June 2020, 15 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Services are operating as GP respiratory clinics in:

• New South Wales
• Victoria
• Queensland
• the Northern Territory
• the Australian Capital Territory

3. Online coronavirus training modules

COVID-19 epidemiology training is now available online for remote area Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioners.

Five online training modules are available on topics such as:

• contact tracing in remote communities
• personal protective equipment
• interviews
• data management

Health practitioners can claim the training as continuous professional development hours to meet their ongoing registration requirements.
The Department of Health acknowledges the Traditional Owners of country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and the Elders both past and present as well as emerging leaders.

4. Remote travel restrictions

On 26 March 2020, the Minister signed a Determination under the Biosecurity Act 2015 to restrict travel into remote communities.

As broader restrictions have eased, we have received queries about lifting remote travel restrictions. The Taskforce has developed a framework on easing remote area travel restrictions.

The Prime Minister announced the framework on 15 May 2020 with AHPPC endorsement. It is in line with the Pandemic Health Intelligence Plan and the broader Government response. It will help us to assess when to change the Determination.

As at 26 June 2020, remote area restrictions under the Biosecurity Determination have been lifted for all of Western Australia, Queensland, the Northern Territory and for three communities in South Australia. Local restrictions may still be in place.

Approaches to restrictions in the states and territories are changing quickly. To stay up to date, please visit australia.gov.au

5. Mental health support for COVID-19

The Australian Government is funding a $74 million package to support the mental health and wellbeing of Australians during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As part of this package, we have been working with Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia (GDPSA) to create mental health and wellbeing resources for First Australians.

View their culturally appropriate advice and posters on staying strong and mentally healthy. GDPSA is creating more resources to respond to community needs. These will be available in print, as podcasts, in Indigenous print media, online and on social media.

The Government is also investing $48.1 million to support the National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan.

About $3.5 million of this funding will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It will focus on those in remote areas who have reduced access to mental health and wellbeing services, education and employment because of mobility limits.

6. Aged care COVID-19 preparedness measure

Aged care providers, including National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flexible Aged Care services, can access more staff during COVID-19 outbreaks. They can access:

- a temporary surge workforce through the online platform Mable
- emergency response teams (Aspen Medical) if there’s a significant outbreak in an aged care facility
- remote locums (Aspen Medical), including nurses, allied health workers, personal care workers and supporting staff

The site also includes COVID-19 infection control and aged care training modules.
The Department of Health acknowledges the Traditional Owners of country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and the Elders both past and present as well as emerging leaders.

To find out more, call the My Aged Care Provider and Assessor Helpline on 1800 836 799.

7. COVID-19 Aged Care Support Program

This program reimburses aged care providers for costs incurred while managing the direct impacts of COVID-19.

Find out how to apply on GrantsConnect.

8. Supporting the mental health of Australians affected by the bushfires

We have provided $1.3 million to NACCHO and Grand Pacific Health to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples affected by the 2019–20 bushfires access culturally appropriate mental health services.

NACCHO is working with its New South Wales, Victorian and Australian Capital Territory affiliates to distribute funding. To date, 13 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services in bushfire-affected regions have received funding to provide:

- culturally appropriate frontline emergency distress and trauma counselling
- integrated social support services
- individual counselling

Grand Pacific Health has provided funding to their regional hubs most affected by the bushfires in Moruya and Bega. The local Aboriginal health teams in these areas are providing welfare checks and phone support to affected communities.

This funding is part of a $76.1 million Australian Government program to support the mental health of bushfire-affected communities.

It complements other parts of the program that support 12 Primary Health Networks to:

- commission initial trauma and grief counselling
- extend existing mental health services
- employ bushfire mental health response coordinators
- extend headspace services
- provide community grants to strengthen social connectedness and resilience

To find out more, contact your local Primary Health Network.

9. Medicare telehealth services

In response to COVID-19, we have expanded access to Medicare telehealth services. These are available until 30 September 2020 to all patients eligible for Medicare in Australia. Telehealth services are for clinically appropriate treatment that can be delivered safely by videoconference or telephone.

GP and other medical practitioner services must bulk bill:

- Commonwealth concession card holders
• children under 16 years of age
• patients who are more vulnerable to COVID-19 (including patients who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and are 50 years of age or older)

Specialists and allied health providers can bulk bill at their discretion.

We are working with health experts to monitor the use and impact of the telehealth measures. Options for extending and refining the measures are being considered based on health requirements, AHPPC advice and stakeholder feedback.

To find out more, read the telehealth factsheets in the Medicare Benefits Schedule factsheets listing.

Routine Updates

10. Blood Borne Viruses (BBV) and Sexually Transmissible Infections (STI) Standing Committee (BBVSS)

On 13 May 2020, the committee held a second Indigenous workshop to:

• discuss the implementation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander BBV and STI Strategy 2018–22
• discuss the agreed actions from the first workshop in November 2019

The committee decided to focus its work on four keys outcomes:

1. Create a reference group, led by Australasian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health Medicine (ASHM), to develop Australian Consensus STI Testing Guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People for primary care clinicians with caveats to recognise jurisdictional differences in epidemiology, clinical priorities and resource allocation.
2. Look at ways to integrate and secure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander BBV and STI health data.
3. Oversee the development of innovative models to retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce staff.
4. Prepare input to the AHPPC’s report to the National Cabinet Health Council on implementing the strategy for BBV and STI health promotion and education.

11. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Blood Borne Viruses and Sexually Transmissible Infections Strategy

The fifth National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander BBV and STI Strategy 2018–22 guides actions to tackle the higher rates of BBV and STI among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

An implementation plan supports the strategy and helps us to monitor progress. The first progress report on the implementation plan is due in mid-2020.
In November 2019, the BBV and STI Standing Committee held a workshop to find ways to reduce BBV and STI rates. Representatives from the Aboriginal community controlled health sector spoke about programs that have been successful and rates and risk factors for BBV and STI among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Committee met in May 2020 to consider the agreed actions from the workshop and provided guidance to the Department on appropriate ways to implement the Strategy.

12. Syphilis Enhanced Response

The Syphilis Enhanced Response continues to address the infectious syphilis outbreak in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in:

- Queensland
- South Australia
- Western Australia
- the Northern Territory

Phase 4 of the response started recently. It provides workforce support to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) in Darwin, Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. This support will ensure a coordinated approach with the Northern Territory government managed primary care clinics, and Mt Isa to address the broad geographic area affected by the outbreak.

The NACCHO, ACCHS and state and territory governments are working together to deliver the Syphilis Enhanced Response.

To date, the Australian Government has provided $21.2 million in funding over four years (2017–18 to 2020–21) to targeted ACCHS in the outbreak regions.

13. Australian Nurse–Family Partnership Program (ANFPP) update

From 1 July 2020, the Molly Wardaguga Research Centre at Charles Darwin University will take over the ANFPP National Support Service.

The ANFPP supports women who are pregnant with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child to help them become the best mum possible. The National Support Service provides development and education to the ANFPP workforce.

Since February 2020, Charles Darwin University has been working with the current provider, Abt Associates, to ensure a smooth transition of support services.

Find out more about the ANFPP.

14. National Stillbirth Action and Implementation Plan

We have extended public comment on the draft National Stillbirth Action and Implementation Plan to 10 July 2020.
The plan aims to reduce the number of stillbirths in Australia, and is the first of its kind. It recognises that some groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, face a higher risk of stillbirth. It includes actions to reduce these risks.

Visit our consultation hub to have your say on the draft plan.

### 15. National Health Reform Agreement

Following agreement by all Australian governments, the [2020–25 National Health Reform Agreement](#) will start on 1 July 2020. It:

- continues to provide increased funding for public hospitals
- sets a new pathway for long-term reform of our health system
- supports the commitment of all governments to the Closing the Gap agenda to improve the lives of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians
- aligns with key Closing the Gap priority reform areas

### 16. Ear equipment supply, maintenance and repair

Australian Government-funded Aboriginal Medical Services and other health clinics with a majority of Indigenous patients can access ear and hearing assessment equipment at no charge. This program is funded to 30 June 2022 and the current equipment provider is Sonic Innovations.

We will soon be writing to ACCHS to survey the use of ear and hearing equipment in health services and the skill level of staff using this equipment. We are doing this to assess the effectiveness of the program and how it can be improved.

To find out more, email IndigenousHearingHealth@health.gov.au

### 17. Ear health assessment training

Training on otitis media management, tympanometry, and audiometry screening and assessment is available free of charge nationally. Participants include Aboriginal Health Workers, general practitioners, nurses and clinics in remote locations.

We have contracted TAFE NSW to provide this training to 30 June 2022. TAFE NSW is piloting its online training and will begin roll out from July this year. Face-to-face training will start when possible.

Training delivered by Benchmarque ended on 30 June 2020.

To find out more, email IndigenousHearingHealth@health.gov.au

### 18. Indigenous Health Roadmaps

Australian health ministers have committed to improving the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by:

- ending rheumatic heart disease and avoidable blindness and deafness
- preventing and managing kidney disease
We have developed roadmaps for ear and hearing health, eye health, renal health and rheumatic heart disease with expert advice and in consultation with Indigenous health stakeholders. The roadmaps will guide actions by Australian governments and key stakeholders.

A working group has been set up to progress the roadmaps. The working group has met twice in 2020 to continue this work.

19. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Plan

Cultural Fusion has provided the Australian Government with a Draft Workforce Plan. Key themes in the plan include:

- integrating pathways from school to further education
- cultural safety
- innovation in models of care
- availability of education and training in regional locations

The Department, in consultation with the Project Reference Group, will undertake further drafting of the Workforce Plan ready for online consultation.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the online consultation replaces the previously proposed national workshop. It will be open to all stakeholders who have been invited to take part in the development of the plan so far.

We expect the final plan to be progressed through the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Standing Committee for Government endorsement in early 2021.

Draft Workforce Plan consultations

To develop the draft plan, Cultural Fusion invited more than 300 organisations to take part in consultations, including:

- Aboriginal community controlled and mainstream health sectors
- education and research institutes
- health workforce peak organisations
- Australian Government agencies
- state and territory governments and health and hospital services

Consultations included 11 regional workshops, face-to-face and telephone interviews, and written submissions.

20. Australian General Practice Training (AGPT) Program and the Remote Vocational Training Scheme (RVTS)

Change in management

Throughout 2021–22, we will hand over the management of the AGPT Program and the RVTS to the:

- Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
• Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine

The colleges will start their training programs from January 2022.

AGPT Program

The AGPT Program includes the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Salary Support Program (see the current Salary Support Program policy) and the Strategic Plans Program. Both will transition to the colleges with our support and support from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders.

Find out more about the AGPT Program.

RVTS

The RVTS provides structured distance education and supervision to doctors who work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and rural and remote locations.

The RVTS will expand their recruitment strategies in 2020–21 to include Salary Support funding for up to five targeted-recruitment training posts. The pilot aims to:

• contribute to an increased, well-distributed GP workforce in remote areas
• help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices and rural and remote communities to attract and retain doctors

Find out more about the RVTS.

21. Review of the Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training (RHMT) Program

Kristine Battye Consulting (KBC Australia) conducted an independent review of the RHMT Program over the past 12 months and has finalised its report.

The review looked at how well the program is achieving its objectives. KBC Australia undertook extensive consultation, including a roundtable meeting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives. They appreciated the insights and contributions that organisations provided through their written submissions and participation in discussions.

Following consideration by Government, we will consult with RHMT program stakeholders about the review.

About the RHMT Program

The program aims to increase the recruitment and retention of medical, nursing, dental and allied health professionals in rural and remote Australia. It supports health professionals to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, including by developing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce.

Find out more about the RHMT Program.
22. Primary health care funding update

We finalised the primary health care funding assessment process in March 2020.

The process did not require organisations to submit an application. We assessed eligible organisations based on information already available. This included analysis of existing performance reports, activity work plans, direct correspondence, and budgets and financial declarations.

We have written to organisations advising them of the assessment outcomes.

Successful organisations will soon receive their grant agreement from the Community Grants Hub.

23. Data collection and the Health Data Portal

Data reporting optional in 2020

We recognise that the COVID-19 pandemic has created extra pressure for health services. Based on advice from the Indigenous health sector and other experts, data reporting in 2020 will not be mandatory.

But we strongly encourage health services to submit their data during the July to August 2020 reporting period. National Key Performance Indicators (nKPIs), Online Services Report (OSR), and Health Care Provider number data:

- support the monitoring of progress, clinical milestones, service delivery and quality improvement
- help us to measure our progress towards Closing the Gap
- will provide a clear picture of how COVID-19 has affected service delivery for health services and the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

Changes to the Health Data Portal

We are continuing to enhance the Health Data Portal to ensure that it is quicker and easier for health services to access data. During the July to August reporting period, improvements include:

- upgraded OSR including validation rules
- improved Qlik interactive reports that allow services to view indicator data results over time and compare them with the average results of similar organisations

On 30 March 2020, the AUSkey was decommissioned. The portal support team is helping health services transition to myGovID and Relationship Authorisation Manager so they can access the portal.

To stay up to date, subscribe to our monthly newsletter by emailing Indigenousreporting@health.gov.au
24. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Services Data Advisory Group (HS DAG)

The HS DAG met on 6 April 2020 via teleconference to discuss the:

- nKPI and OSR Implementation Roadmap
- nKPI Indicator Selection and Maintenance Framework
- nKPI December 2019 Reporting Data and future OSR development
- potential project impacts due to the COVID 19 pandemic

Read the meeting communiques for data collection outcomes and the work of the group more broadly.

Find out more about the HS DAG.

25. nKPI and OSR Implementation Roadmap

In May 2018, we commissioned the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to review the nKPI and OSR data collections to identify:

- their strengths and weaknesses
- ways to better meet the future needs of health services, policymakers, and researchers

The AIHW published its final review report on 21 February 2020. The review found that the Indigenous primary health sector recognises how important both collections are for national reporting and policy development. The review recommends actions to improve the relevance and usefulness of the collections.

On 9 December 2019, the Health Services Data Advisory Group (HS DAG) endorsed the nKPI and OSR Implementation Roadmap. The roadmap sets out timeframes for implementing the 36 recommendations.

26. Food regulation

Reform and review

In November 2019, the Australia and New Zealand Ministerial Forum on Food Regulation endorsed a plan to reform the Australian and New Zealand Food Regulation System. This plan will ensure the system stays strong, robust and agile.

A key part of the reform agenda is a detailed review of the Food Standards Australia New Zealand Act 1991 (FSANZ Act). We will lead this work and engage stakeholders as part of the process. We want to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations can have a say.

To find out more about the review, go to the Food Regulation website.
Pregnancy resources

We would like to develop some easy to understand pregnancy resources about healthy eating, physical activity and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The first step will be to find out what targeted pregnancy resources are already available.

We may approach stakeholders in June or July 2020 about this project.

To find out more, email the Obesity Team at obesity@health.gov.au