



Position Statement: Impacts of racism on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians

Acknowledgement of Country

The National Rural Health Commissioner (the Commissioner) and her Office acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia. The Commissioner recognises and deeply respects the strength, wisdom and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their continuing connection and relationship to rivers, lands and seas.

The Commissioner and her Office pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging, and extends that respect to all First Nations people including those reading this position statement.

The Commissioner is committed to working for the advancement of better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Commissioner is committed to doing this by promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' expertise, opinions, leadership and perspectives through their voices, shared stories, effective feedback mechanisms, and collaborative design processes and advocating for the inclusion of the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all health discussions. The Commissioner is confident that her Office can make an important contribution to reconciliation, and she looks forward to continuing this journey.

Key points ^{1,2,3}

- There is strong evidence of the impact of racism and barriers to accessing health services for Indigenous people negatively impacting a range of health outcomes for Indigenous people irrespective of geography
- Racism negatively impacts the attraction, recruitment, retention and leadership opportunities of the Indigenous health workforce.
- Understanding and addressing racism is a key to increasing the uptake of health services and improving health outcomes.
- Transformational change can only be achieved when Indigenous knowledge and cultures are acknowledged and recognised and services are co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations..

The Office of the National Rural Health Commissioner commits to:

- Supporting the [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031](#) and appropriate funding to implement the recommendations of the soon to be released National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031.⁴
- Recognising that racism experienced at an interpersonal, institutional or systemic level has significant impact on access to healthcare services and health and wellbeing outcomes for Indigenous Australians.
- Recognising that for racism to be eliminated from Australian health services and systems Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in the health workforce must be increased and all health professionals must follow culturally responsive and safe practices.
- Embedding Indigenous representation and shared decision-making processes into the development of all rural health policy activities undertaken.
- Advocating for the inclusion of Indigenous communities, leaders, Indigenous organisations (as communities) and all health service providers in the design of locally developed multidisciplinary, culturally safe and responsive rural health care that address community need including building stronger referral pathways between Indigenous health services (including Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS), tertiary and secondary care.
- Supporting the [National Agreement on Closing the Gap \(the National Agreement\)](#)⁵ commitment to the prioritisation of improving Indigenous health outcomes and advocating for appropriate funding from Commonwealth, state and territory governments to support locally developed culturally safe and responsive health services.
- Supporting the dismantling of systemic barriers for Indigenous medical, nursing, allied health students and health workers and practitioners accessing, pursuing and sustaining careers in Australia's health system.
- Recognising the value of ACCHS and other Indigenous services models of care are grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander holistic concepts of health and ill health, which incorporate body, mind, spirit, land, environment, custom and socioeconomic status.
- Supporting and growing the ACCHS and Indigenous health sector in rural and remote areas, recognising these services set the benchmark for the delivery of holistic, culturally safe and responsive care and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.
- Supporting the evaluation of policy and programs in line with [Indigenous Evaluation Strategy 2020](#)⁶ for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such as those produced by the *Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies* and the *National Health and Medical Research Council*.
- Promoting cultural safety and the eradication of racism experienced by patients and workforce in line with the specific actions in the [National Safety and Quality Health Service \(NSQHS\) Standard](#)⁷ including further work to ensure the workforce is supported to identify, report and address acts of racism.

The Office of the National Rural Health Commissioner will work towards dismantling racism in the health sector by:

Working closely with Indigenous leaders and peak health organisations to advise Governments, medical institutions, colleges and universities to ensure racism is acknowledged and addressed, through:

- the identification of institutional racism, such as the application of the *National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards six specific steps to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*”;
- culturally safe and responsive research practices, adhering to locally constructed health research principles and ethics committees, and respecting community and individual right to decline participation;⁸
- advocacy for funding and resourcing to action the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031*;
- Indigenous collaboration in the co-design, leadership, development and delivery of place-based health services, performance indicators, service delivery models and independent evaluation; and
- advocating for appropriate responses to systems, settings and situations that are identified as culturally inappropriate, damaging or destructive.

Recommending governments, medical institutions, colleges and universities dismantle systemic barriers for Indigenous medical, nursing and allied health students accessing, pursuing and maintaining a career in Australia’s health system by:

- Continued advocacy for adequate funding and resourcing to action the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031*;
- Encouraging systemic collaboration to implement strategies to grow the numbers of Indigenous doctors, health professionals entering Specialist Training Programs and rural generalist pathways;
- Promoting the inclusion of all relevant Indigenous health peak bodies in the development of innovations in health care, and the development, design and delivery of policy responses on increasing the Indigenous health workforce;
- Continued advocacy at the national and jurisdictional levels for culturally safe and responsive places of education and training for Indigenous health leaders, doctors, nurses, allied health practitioners and health workers;
- Encouraging institutions to ensure accessible information, tools, guidelines, policies, and curricula that enable people working in the health sector to effect change within themselves and their environment, including timely and responsive workforce complaint mechanisms; and
- Promoting recognition and respect for different ways of learning, and diverse cultural dialogues around medicine, health and wellbeing.

Promoting cultural safety and responsiveness and the eradication of racism in the health sector experienced by consumers and workforce through:

- Actively promoting the acceptance, respect, and the community strength that comes from cultural diversity and multiculturalism, including observing days of significance and responding accordingly;
- Maintaining support for mandatory cultural safety and responsiveness training for all employees in the health sector that is place-based and appropriate to locality, substantial, face to face and embedded in broader cultural safety strategies that focus on deep, continual learning;
- Encouraging all health services to investigate and strategically implement translation and interpreting services of Indigenous languages where they are available; and
- endorsing positive consumer experiences, including having access to supportive representation, and access to information regarding their right.

References:

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2. Knowles, R (2021) *Institutional racism silencing Indigenous knowledge in health care*. National Indigenous Times [accessed November 2021] <https://nit.com.au/institutional-racism-silencing-indigenous-knowledge-in-health-care/>
3. Aboriginal Health Policy Directorate, 2017, *Understanding Institutionalised Racism*, Department of Health of Western Australia, Perth.[accessed November 2021] <https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/-/media/Corp/Documents/Improving-health/Aboriginal-Health/Understanding-Institutionalised-Racism.pdf>
4. Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Health (2021) *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031* [accessed December 2021] https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/12/national-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-health-plan-2021-2031_2.pdf
5. Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2020) *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* [accessed November 2021] <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap>
6. Commonwealth of Australia, Productivity Commission (2020) *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy* [accessed November 2021] <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/indigenous-evaluation/strategy/indigenous-evaluation-strategy.pdf>
7. The Wardliparingga Aboriginal Research Unit of the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute.(2017) *National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards user guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health*. Sydney: Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care
8. Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (2020) *AH&MRC Ethical Guidelines: Key Principles (2020) V2.0* [accessed November 2021] <https://www.ahmrc.org.au/publication/ahmrc-guidelines-for-research-into-aboriginal-health-2020/>