

Close the Gap: Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association

Education, role models, cultural safety and mutual respect can go a long way

I would describe myself as an Aboriginal man who loves being a doctor. I love working one-on-one with my patients and feel a sense of satisfaction in the knowledge that, in my own small way, the work that I do contributes towards closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health outcomes.

It was a long journey to get to where I am today. I was always interested in becoming a doctor, but I thought that it was only for “rich people” or “doctors’ kids” — not someone like me. After completing my Year 10 certificate, I became an apprentice fitter machinist in a coal mine. My dreams of becoming a doctor might have ended there had I not seen Dr Louis Peachey and Dr Sandra Eades, the first Indigenous medical graduates from the University of Newcastle, interviewed on The Ray Martin Show. On that fateful day in the 1990s, Louis and Sandra’s confidence, determination and passion made me realise that I could do it too.

My story, and those of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors like me, illustrates the importance of education, good role models and cultural safety — all the things that the Australian Indigenous Doctors’ Association continues to advocate. Today, our organisation is proud to boast of the 130 Aboriginal and Torres



The Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association Ltd

Yaga Bugaul Dungen

Strait Islander doctors and a further 130 medical students around the country. These are pleasing figures, but there is still much work to do to raise them to reach parity with the proportion of doctors per head of population.

“Close the Gap” is not a mere slogan. The opportunity to contribute towards growing the next generation of Indigenous doctors is the reason I took up my current post as Associate Professor of Indigenous Health at the University of Newcastle. One of the things that I try to convey to students is the importance of an all-of-system response. In other words, we’re all in this together — it’s not just up to Indigenous people to make a difference; everyone in the health system needs to contribute to close the gap. Another important aspect is two-way respect. When health professionals go to communities, it is expected that they show respect, but it is also reasonable that community members show them respect too. I think that’s a fair starting block upon which to build relationships.



Peter O’Mara, Vice President
Australian Indigenous Doctors’ Association, Canberra, ACT