

Editorials



Partnership and leadership: key to improving health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

The Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association urges all medical professionals to support and participate in the values it hopes will be embedded in future health policy

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This year, we will see the development of a new National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan to guide governments in improving the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.¹ Development of the Health Plan will be led by the Minister for Indigenous Health, with the support of a stakeholder advisory group to bring together the government and organisations with expertise in Indigenous health.²

The aim of this Health Plan is to shape the tone, direction and content of Indigenous health policy into the future. Apart from becoming familiar with the evidence and government priorities on areas of Indigenous health that relate to our work, medical professionals should note the particular values and themes that the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA) wants to see embedded throughout the document; these include culture, partnership, Indigenous leadership and workforce. These principles are inextricably linked and are important not only to federal policy development and implementation but also to individual medical professionals in a range of areas, including in our day-to-day interactions with patients, care planning and staff recruitment and development.

Workforce will need to be an important feature of the Health Plan because building an adequate health workforce is crucial to delivering high-quality, sustainable health services for Indigenous people. The Indigenous medical workforce in Australia is growing, but Indigenous people are still underrepresented in this area. In 2011, the intake of first-year Indigenous medical students in Australian universities reached parity at 2.5% — for the first time matching the proportion of Australia's population made up of Indigenous people.³ To ensure that the Indigenous medical workforce continues to grow, academic, professional and cultural support is essential. In particular, Indigenous medical students and doctors are more likely to stay and thrive in learning and working environments that consistently demonstrate cultural safety.³

The solution to both a stronger workforce and further improvements in Indigenous health is partnership: our people working alongside non-Indigenous people in order to achieve an agreed goal. Such partnerships are seen in collaboration agreements which spread across the medical education continuum. Agreements currently exist between AIDA and Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand, and

AIDA and the Confederation of Postgraduate Medical Education Councils; an agreement will soon be launched between AIDA and the Committee of Presidents of Medical Colleges. This collaboration did not happen overnight; it was a lengthy process, with trust being built over time and through each organisation demonstrating its commitment to improving Indigenous health. These best-practice models are available on the AIDA website (<http://www.aida.org.au/partnerships.aspx>) and should be recognised by all medical professionals as a best-practice framework for improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, health is not just about an individual's physical wellbeing; it is a holistic concept that encompasses the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the entire community. AIDA asserts that the Health Plan needs to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures at its centre in recognition of the importance of culture to the health and wellbeing of Indigenous people. As medical professionals, we must also embed culture in the provision of health services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as evidence shows correlations between increased cultural attachment and better health and wellbeing.¹ In achieving this, it is important that the Health Plan

be developed and conducted through genuine partnerships between governments, Indigenous organisations and communities, not only because such an approach is consistent with what is contained in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but because it makes good sense.⁴

AIDA recommends creating strong partnerships with Indigenous organisations and communities to guarantee Indigenous participation in decision making and showcase strong Indigenous leadership in communities.³

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, particularly through the peak national health bodies, is paramount in providing government with professional advice from Indigenous health practitioners in developing the Health Plan.³ AIDA recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health organisations play a central role in the health of Indigenous people; however, it is also important that members of the non-Indigenous mainstream health workforce play their

role in delivering equitable services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is expected that the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan will be released later this year. I encourage you, upon reading it, to ask yourself what *your* role is in delivering quality and culturally appropriate health care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and to consider how this role could be strengthened. As members of the health workforce, we need to locate ourselves within the Health Plan and implement strategies in partnership with Indigenous communities and organisations. AIDA argues that this combination of strategic action and partnership is critical to achieving equitable

health and life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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- 1 Department of Health and Ageing. Development of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan. Discussion Paper. Canberra: DoHA, 2012. [http://www.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/BBD9AB3F4B741A9BCA257A750003DCDC/\\$File/Discussion_paper_final0912.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/BBD9AB3F4B741A9BCA257A750003DCDC/$File/Discussion_paper_final0912.pdf) (accessed May 2013).
- 2 Department of Health and Ageing. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan. Canberra: DoHA, 2013. <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/natsih-plan> (accessed Jun 2013).
- 3 Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association. Submission — National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan. Canberra: AIDA, 2013. http://www.aida.org.au/pdf/submissions/Submission_20.pdf (accessed May 2013).
- 4 O'Mara P. Our doctors making a difference. *Med J Aust* 2011; 194: 493-494. □