

“Now we say Black Lives Matter but ... the fact of the matter is, we just Black matter to them”¹

If Black lives matter we need to be prepared to examine and address racial violence within the Australian health system

My name is Kevin Yow Yeh and today I march for every Black death in custody but I especially march for my grandfather Kevin Yow Yeh Sr. At the age of 34 this man apparently had a heart attack at a Mackay watch house ... This last month we've seen plenty of stats, 430 plus Black deaths in custody ... and that's only since the Royal Commission, but what about all those deaths that led to that. My grandfather was one of them. Let's humanise these stories. When this man had a heart attack, he left his wife and he left five young children. My grandmother was still having his children when she had to put this man in the ground. That's why we march! Of course we stand in solidarity with our brothers in America. And, of course we stand in solidarity with our sisters in West Papua ... but today we stand for our lives here, on stolen land.²



The statistical story of Indigenous health and death, despite how stark, fails to do justice to the violence of racialised health inequities that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to experience. This story has been reported on unremarkably in federal parliament for over a decade, as an annual account-keeping exercise of policy failure and statistical targets not met.³ This story of failure and failing health has been told countless times in health and medical journal publications, and despite growing more frequent in number, these contributions to new knowledge never seem to translate to improved health outcomes. This story of failure does not do justice to the trauma and loss that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities experience. This story of failure does not do justice to the pain of never meeting the grandfather that you are named after. Tragically, despite the parlous state of Indigenous health, we have not been met here with the kind of urgency that the global Black Lives Matter movement has spurred elsewhere.

What we have been presented with, aside from the Health Minister admonishing Black Lives Matter protestors for putting the health of the public at risk,⁴ has been the triumphal announcement of “research projects”,⁵ the release of a “landmark report”,⁶ and a drafting of “refreshed” and “historic targets”.⁷ All of these supposedly fresh responses were on track before the Black Lives Matter movement hit our shore. Rather than the “new normal” which the threat of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) inspired, the Australian health system’s Black Lives Matter moment is best characterised as indifferent; a “business as usual” approach that we know from experience betokens failure.

When the threat of COVID-19 loomed, action was swift and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within and outside of the health system was even swifter in establishing taskforces, lobbying for additional resources for the community controlled

sector, instituting special border control measures for remote Indigenous communities, and the development of emergency response plans to protect their communities.^{8,9} The effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic sits in sharp contrast to the ongoing pandemic of racism that Indigenous peoples have been fighting since 1788 and which has taken far more Black lives in Australia.

Sweet points out: “To date, there is very little sign that senior health policy makers, from the Chief Medical Officer to Health Minister Greg Hunt, will use their authority to name and address the system racism that contributes to poorer healthcare, as it does to overincarceration”.¹⁰ While broad attention is often focused on Black deaths in custody, the premature deaths of Indigenous peoples from supposed natural causes inside and outside of custody tell a consistent story of failure and violence that marks the Australian health system and society more broadly.

Against the quietude of the Australian health system on racism are the powerful voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, on television screens, on public streets and in our spreadsheets, speaking the truth about how little Black lives seem to matter. Both Indigenous clients and clinicians have stories to tell of the violence of racism in the health system, of being cast in the category of less capable, less compliant, less deserving of care and less worthy of the category of human. This then brings us to the coronial inquiry, the endgame of not caring; of neglect. Here, never let us forget the mothers, the children, the cousins and the spouses weeping outside coroner’s courts, bearing photos of their loved ones in their hands and on their clothing, simultaneously appealing for care and for justice.¹¹ Moreover, let us not for a second dismiss the anguish of having to fight for the release of recorded footage of your loved one’s final moments, to be replayed over and over, in which they too plead vainly, “I can’t breathe”.¹²

So many grieving Indigenous families continue to appeal to the state for care and for justice via

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coronial inquiries in the hope that their tragedy will not befall another. But the awful truth is that the recommendations of coronial inquiries are not enforceable because the inquest is meant to discover what happened rather than determine responsibility. So again, regardless of the findings, the resulting outcome is business as usual. The coronial inquiry represents a theatre of power where, in the presence of an avoidable Indigenous death, the state declares its benevolence; duly recording the steps taken and policies and procedures adhered to or those requiring review, and the best efforts of police, medical officers or first responders, to deem the death another “unavoidable” tragedy. Gomerio scholar Whittaker¹¹ notes how the discourse of “natural causes” in coronial inquiries works to render Indigenous peoples as “fated to die” and beyond care because they were “already dead”. The coronial inquiry represents a moment of confluence of the health and legal systems and the state that seek to erase Indigenous existence and affirm the settler trope of a dying race. It represents the theatre of Indigenous health policy writ large.

The story of Indigenous health failure, of persisting and alarming health statistics that are routinely attributed to a complex web of social, cultural and economic factors, sustains the notion of the inevitability of Indigenous ill health, of a race destined to die out, despite the best of efforts and intentions. How do we explain an unwavering commitment to a failed Indigenous health policy framework amid a global movement centred around the importance of Black lives, and a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan vision of a health system “free of racism” with no strategy for addressing systemic racism?¹³ How do we further explain the focus on the individual health behaviours or “choices” of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples when we know “incessant racial health inequities across nearly every major health index reveal less about what patients have failed to feel and more about what systems have failed to do”.¹⁴ As Boyd and colleagues point out, “The solution to racial health inequities is to address racism and its attendant harms and erect a new health care infrastructure that no longer profits from the persistence of inequitable disease”.¹⁴

Earlier this year, the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme demonstrated the type of Black Lives Matter moment that the Closing the Gap refreshed, by launching the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Cultural Safety Strategy 2020-2025.¹⁵ The strategy sets clear directions for the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, the national boards and accreditation authorities, which regulate Australia’s 740 000 registered health practitioners to ensure that patient safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is the norm. The landmark strategy embodies ambition and partnership to address racism and culturally safe care; shifting the blame of failure for good health from Black bodies and instead demanding structural and individual health reform of health practitioners and the systems that regulate them.

It is this shift of focus that has been central to the calls from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Black wounds have been laid bare, to reveal the violence of health and legal systems upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a desperate appeal for those same systems to care.

*At 34 years of age my grandfather died, where’s his justice? ... what about all the other families, what about all the other fathers, brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces ...? What about all the other mob? Where’s their justice? My name’s Kevin Yow Yeh, f*** the system, if you’re not with us you’re against us!²*

What is needed is an Australian health system that has a steadfast commitment to Black lives: not as in need of saving, but as deserving of care; one that matches the staunchness of grieving Black families marching the streets of our capital cities in the midst of a pandemic. Such a commitment demands that we abandon the failed Indigenous health policy of Closing the Gap¹⁶ in favour of a health justice framework,¹⁷ which would include, but not be limited to:

- A foregrounding of Indigenous sovereignty rendering visible the strength, capability and humanity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, services and communities in all processes of health policy formation and implementation, not as partners but as architects.
- State and federal government commitment to the recommendations of the coronial inquiries into the deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have died of preventable or avoidable conditions in the health system, and the establishment of an Indigenous taskforce to oversee implementation.
- An explicit financial commitment from the National Health and Medical Research Council and the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute (via the Indigenous Medical Research Future Fund) and the Australian Research Council for research that attends to the nature and function of race in producing the conditions that allow racialised health inequalities to persist, from birth to death, including the embodied consequences of racism.
- The establishment of awareness-raising campaigns that make clear the various ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may seek justice when experiencing discrimination within the health system, and commensurable resourcing of legal services to support Indigenous peoples to take action.
- Introduction of publication guidelines for health and medical journals requiring research relating to racialised health disparities to foreground institutional racism in its analysis, rather than socio-economic disadvantage and other social and cultural factors.
- Development of an interdisciplinary Indigenous health workforce agenda that centres the care of Indigenous people beyond capacity building to include attending to racial violence within workplaces across the Australian health system.

We offer these strategies not as a solution, but as some small steps towards a radical reimagining of the Black body within the Australian health system; one which demonstrates a more genuine commitment to the cries of “Black Lives Matter” from blackfullas in this place right now.

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