



NATSIHWA
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Health Worker Association



House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs

Pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians in employment and business

SUBMISSION October 2020

About NATSIHWA

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker Association (NATSIHWA) is a national peak workforce association committed to ensuring Australia's health care system meets the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

We have been funded by the Australian Government since establishment in August 2009 to:

- › promote the prevention and control of disease and other health conditions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- › improve the health outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- › address the impacts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage and
- › address the under representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working within Australia's health care system.

We achieve this by:

- › delivering and collaborating on initiatives to promote, professionalise and expand the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner workforce
- › recognising, addressing and promoting the social and cultural determinants of health
- › establishing and maintaining networks, partnerships and alliances with key government agencies, other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, researchers, academic institutions, and other national health bodies
- › participating in a range of key strategic initiatives to influence the design and delivery of policies, programs and services
- › role modelling the benefits of community control and self-determination and
- › implementing rights-based best practice principles and approaches.

A key part of our role involves directly supporting a national membership network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners. In this respect we:

- › support and promote policies to ensure the effective utilisation and professional integration of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner workforce
- › provide support, training and resources to improve the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and management of disease and chronic health conditions
- › deliver professional development forums, conferences and symposiums
- › liaise with regulators, training authorities and employers to ensure the recruitment and retention of a skilled and competent workforce and
- › actively promote education and career pathways.

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity of responding to the House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs inquiry into pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians in employment and business.

NATSIHWA considers that a whole of government joined up approach to the professional integration and expansion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner Workforce would provide valuable career pathways and significant employment opportunities while maximising Government investment by delivering health, education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

A number of significant structural barriers are currently inhibiting the utilisation and growth of this workforce. This submission provides an overview of these barriers and also identifies significant opportunities for growing and expanding the professional reach of this workforce. A list of recommendations has been provided at the end of this Submission. NATSIHWA would welcome the opportunity of discussing these with you further.

About the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner Workforce

From our understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners comprise the only culturally based health workforce with national training and registration in the world and as such should be regarded as a source of national pride.

Together these occupations form part of a standalone professional workforce that plays a critical role in connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to health care filling a critical gap in Australia's health care system. With a combination of clinical, cultural and community development skills Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners act as cultural brokers, health system navigators and provide a high standard of culturally safe care. Evidence directly connects their roles to improved health outcomes across the life course. Their lived experience and deep understanding of the communities they serve delivers an engagement capability and reach that sets them apart from other professionals in the health care system.

Unlike Allied Health Professionals who are university trained in specific disciplines of practice, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner Workforce receive practical primary health care training through the vocational education and training system¹. Importantly, this is designed to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with vital entrance level pathways for careers in the health sector, as well as, access to culturally safe care.

Of the two professions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners, in particular, have a high level of clinical skills and are trained to work autonomously. To recognise this they have been required to meet practice standards and register under the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) national registration and accreditation scheme with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practice Board since 2012.

To ensure Australia's health care system meets the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and addresses the under representation (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people currently only

¹ It is important to note that whilst Allied Health Assistants are also VET trained their courses are focused on specific disciplines of practice.

constitute 1 per cent of the health workforce despite being 3.3 per cent of the Australian population²) there is a genuine occupational requirement to ensure this workforce comprises only Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

NATSIHWA defines an:

- › **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Worker** as:
An Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person who has gained a Certificate II or higher qualification in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care from one of the health training packages listed in the table below.

Course Number	Title
HLT20113	Certificate II in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care (Care)
HLT30113	Certificate III in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care (Care)
HLT40113	Certificate IV in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care (Care)
HLT50113	Diploma of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care (Care)
HLT60113	Advanced Diploma of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care (Care)

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner as:

An Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person who has gained a Certificate IV in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care Practice, (or higher qualification as outlined below), and has successfully applied for and been registered with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practice Board of Australia through the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA).

Course Number	Title
HLT40213	Certificate IV in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care (Practice)
HLT50213	Diploma of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care (Practice)

What they do

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners undertake a wide variety of roles and deliver a broad range of services. They are trained to work autonomously or to be integrated as part of multidisciplinary health care teams and make valuable contributions in positions spanning generalist primary health care, community health promotion and prevention, and in specialty fields including but not limited to; maternal and child health, substance misuse, justice health, and social and emotional wellbeing.

Depending upon the work setting and individual scope of practice they are able to provide:

- › clinical services such as the assessment and screening of physical health and social emotional wellbeing and providing care in line with care plans and/or treatment protocols
- › planning, delivering and evaluating preventative health programs

² In 2016, an estimated 798,365 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were in Australia, representing 3.3% of the total Australian population (ABS 2018b). The Indigenous population is projected to reach about 1.1 million people by 2031 (ABS 2019).
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/profile-of-indigenous-australians>

- › community engagement and facilitating communication including interpreting and translating language
- › education, training and the provision of support and advice on providing culturally-safe health services to other health professionals, policy makers, researchers and educators
- › management activities including, staff supervision and mentoring, business and financial management and quality improvement.

Given their critical professional role, it is important to note that a number of the services the workforce provides are recognised under Australia's Medicare Benefits Scheme (MBS), and if working for an eligible employer, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers with a minimum Certificate III in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care and all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners may be eligible to apply for a Medicare provider number.

Current barriers to professional integration and workforce growth

Despite a significant body of evidence directly connecting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner workforce to improved health outcomes across the life course³ the professions continue to be undervalued and underutilised across the healthcare system⁴. Research undertaken in 2019 indicates:

- › a lack of growth (commensurate with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population) and ageing of this Workforce with the most notable declines occurring in younger aged profiles and especially males⁵ and
- › that an unacceptably high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are lost to the professions due to difficulty completing entry level coursework.

Given the significant benefits the Workforce provides in terms of better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we remain concerned that overall too little is being done to support workforce expansion especially through measures to promote and consolidate career pathways and to improve recruitment, training and retention. With a projected growth of over 250,000 new health and social sector jobs over the next 5 years (with nearly 70,000 of these in rural and remote areas)⁶, there is a significant opportunity to address this issue.

Across the health care system there are many examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who have started careers in this Workforce and successfully transitioned to nursing, allied health, general practitioners, researchers and practice managers. While this demonstrates the professions provide vital entrance level pathways for careers in the health sector, the lack of a robust career progression framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners is encouraging people towards job opportunities outside the health sector, where there are perceived greater career opportunities.⁷

This points to the need for investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led pathway programs that provide greater support for VET programs and a pipeline of entrants from VET in schools with wrap around

³ A. Wright, K. Briscoe, R. Lovett, (2019), A national profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers 2006–2016, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 43 (1) available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1753-6405.12864>

⁴ Stajic J (2020) '... But what about the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Worker academic? Transcending the role of 'unknowing assistant' in health care and research through higher education: a personal journey.' The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2020.21>

⁵ A. Wright, K. Briscoe, R. Lovett, (2019), A national profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers 2006–2016, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 43 (1) available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1753-6405.12864>

⁶ Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Industry Employment Projections 2019. Retrieved on 30 September 2020 at <https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/EmploymentProjections>

⁷ Skills IQ, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker, Industry Reference Committee 2019 Industry Skills Forecast Consultation Draft. Retrieved on 6 October 2020 at: <https://www.skillsiq.com.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/Industry-Skills-Forecasts-June2017/2019%20Draft%20Forecasts/2019%20Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20Health%20Worker%20Industry%20Skills%20Forecast%20CONSULTATION%20DRAFT%202.pdf>

support and articulation to tertiary studies. In regards to tertiary studies in particular the current system for recognising prior learning is relatively inflexible and acts to inhibit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners to successfully transition into tertiary education, this includes qualification and eligibility for courses, and for gaining unit exemptions towards degrees.

Jurisdictional variations in legislation (including Drugs and Poisons Acts), regulations and workplace policies also continue to present significant barriers to recruitment, retention and recognition and frequently limit the scope of what the workforce can undertake. Addressing these issues is also critical to attracting, expanding and professionalising the workforce.

NATSIHWA, together with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak workforce organisations, has recommended these issues be addressed through the new National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Plan under development within the Department of Health. Ensuring adequate investment in the implementation of this plan will deliver health, employment and education outcomes in regional and remote Australia. Support for this plan, as well as a complementary employment strategy and investment towards its implementation would be invaluable.

It is also important to note that this plan identifies that a lack of accurate data on the recruitment and retention of the workforce is also impeding the ability to develop a comprehensive understanding of workforce trends and undertake strategic workforce planning.

With respect to employment opportunities and growing the workforce there is also potential for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner workforce to play a role in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and in Aged Care. In regards to the NDIS there are considerable opportunities to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health practitioners in particular (given their AHPRA registration) as eligible to become NDIS providers. And, with the introduction of an appropriate bridging course the Primary Health Care training received by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners could easily translate across to Aged Care. This would open up further career pathways, assist retaining these workers in the health care system, address underrepresentation and strengthen the delivery of aged care and disability services to our people.

Investing in the professional integration and expansion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner Workforce delivers all Australian Governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people significant benefits.

Recommendations

NATSIHWA recommends that the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs:

1. note that focussing attention and resources towards the professional integration and expansion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner workforce would result in education, employment and health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It provides viable alternative pathways for long term careers in the health sector.
2. consider how Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments can work together to:
 - › harness opportunities for expanding the professions into aged care and the provision of disability services and
 - › address the barriers impacting upon the professional integration and expansion of this workforce including:
 - the jurisdictional variations in legislation (including Drugs and Poisons Acts), regulations and workplace policies
 - improving workforce data especially non AHPRA health professions
 - investment in supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led pathway programs that foster achievement from VET in schools through to tertiary studies
 - greater flexibility in terms of recognition of prior learning.