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National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker Association

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The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker Association (NATSIHWA) thank you for the opportunity to provide this response to proposed **National Code of Conduct for healthcare workers (National Code)**.

As the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners across Australia, NATSIHWA is therefore positioned to provide early comments. NATSIHWA has 600 registered members which is approximately 50% of the current ATSIHW workforce reporting of 1256. Membership numbers are growing steadily and our current prediction of 800 in 2017 could be an under-estimation.

NATSIHWA was established in 2009 to strengthen the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce as part of its "Closing the Gap" initiatives. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce is a critical component of a wider health workforce to make major contributions to the health outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Without ATSIHWs delivering effective, front line, culturally and holistic safe, comprehensive primary health care services, Australia will fall short of "Closing the Gap" on health inequities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There is substantial peer reviewed evidence that better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are achieved when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers are involved in healthcare delivery.

With the introduction of the National Registration Scheme in July 2012, ATSIHWs could registered as health practitioners that entitled them to use the protected title of "Aboriginal Health Practitioner"; "Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner"; and/or "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner. The registered profession follows a similar Continuing Professional Development process similar to GPs and Nurses ensuring that currency of these titles must be renewed on an annual basis. ATSIHB has reported that there are 308 registered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners. This constitutes about a quarter of the total of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker workforce and which means the National Code .

NATSIHWA would like to point out that the remaining health workers are at different levels of education standards which is a current challenge to pinpoint how many "unregistered health workers" are currently "practicing". This could be due to the various titles used in all health sectors and what constitutes "practice".

NATSIHWA's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker Professional Practice Framework developed in 2012, is a document that provides the context of the health worker role which is specific to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and how it is vital in delivering care to the community in a culturally safe environment. Elements of this Framework are more than appropriate for inclusion within the proposed "National Code". As is the elements of the current *Draft Cultural Safety Framework* which provides a cultural context for a workplace environment could also be considered in the proposed "National Code".

NATSIHWA is committed to representing this workforce to ensure there is a qualified and competent workforce to achieve better outcomes for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their communities in all health settings. For example, NATSIHWA is currently leading the work around Scope of Practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners. State and Territory jurisdictions and the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Sector recently met to discuss a national document to provide a consistent guideline in developing a Scope of Practice. This would add value to the standards developed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner Board to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers are consistently working within their knowledge base and the current state and territory legislations around "practicing within law".

In view of supporting the cultural uniqueness of the role of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker, the proposed "National Code" should ensure that ATSIHWs and ATSIHPs are not disadvantaged through discrimination; that the proposed "National Code" should ensure that cultural integrity, cultural knowledge and respect is embedded in the proposed standards.

We acknowledge the attempt in 2010-11 to develop a "National Code" and that there are two states that have implemented a similar scheme. However, NATSIHWA feels that at this point in time, the timeframe is inadequate to comprehensively canvass the views of our members. NATSIHWA would therefore seek further discussions and consultation time on the requirements of the proposed "National Code". We would be happy to facilitate this through our 2014 Forums and other member network mechanisms.

Regards



Chairperson: Jenny Poelina

Date: 29<sup>th</sup> April 2014