

Communiqué

December 2022



The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce series

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce series provided an opportunity for key stakeholders to meet and discuss important factors affecting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce and identify actions needed to best support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners.

Through listening to experiences of Indigenous practitioners and critically reflecting on our own practices, we look to find opportunities to increase the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce and improve the support structures around them.

Background to the series

The [National Scheme's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Cultural Safety Strategy 2020-2025](#) outlined convening a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce summit.

Because of the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the summit has been converted into an event series held in a blended format including online webinars. A face-to-face event is planned for 2023 if safe to do so.

The blended format allows access to these important Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce discussions for all stakeholders on a national scale, while considering the health and safety of all participants.

Webinars

A series of three webinars were held during August and September 2022. They were:

- Beyond COVID-19: Career pipeline planning for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce, 12 August 2022
- The cost of failing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Practitioner, 2 September 2022
- Best practice models for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners, 23 September 2022

Each of the webinars identified important themes and clear calls to actions, these are detailed below.

Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency
National Boards
GPO Box 9958 Melbourne VIC 3001 [Ahpra.gov.au](https://www.ahpra.gov.au) 1300 419 495

Ahpra and the National Boards regulate these registered health professions: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practice, Chinese medicine, chiropractic, dental, medical, medical radiation practice, midwifery, nursing, occupational therapy, optometry, osteopathy, paramedicine, pharmacy, physiotherapy, podiatry and psychology.

What were the outcomes? Calls to action

Clear calls to action were made during the event series with consistent themes arising during each of the three webinars.

**Please note, where you see the term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner/s' referenced in this document this specifically refers to the practitioners of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practice profession. The uncapitalised version, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioners' refers to Indigenous practitioners across the 15 registered health professions regulated by Ahpra.*

Calls to action

Accept

- **Accept** that racism exists in the healthcare system and that it kills Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples need to **lead** educational cultural safety programs and conduct assessments of cultural safety, specifically in accreditation – this aligns with the self-determining National Scheme's definition of 'cultural safety.'

Educate

- **Address** your own biases. The biases that exist in clinical and education settings limits the autonomy and growth in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioner's practice.
- **Understand and value** the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners*, health workers and health services. They are critical to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities.

Support

- **Listen** to and **empower** the voices of people who are experiencing racism. **Reflect** on what you hear.
- **Address** scope of practice 'turf wars' and gatekeeping through education, including embedding cultural safety in education and continuing professional development (CPD).
- **Share** power with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners.
- **Accommodate** the cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioners.

Invest

- **Understand** that representation is important and **work to improve** this in your institution through a reconciliation action plan, employment strategy, mentorship programs and dedicated culturally safe spaces.
- **Create** safe spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues in your institutions. Provide the investment and step back, you don't need to be part of the community.
- **Engage** with Indigenous leadership and communities and **embed** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led decision-making at every level.
- **Invest** and trust Indigenous leaders leadership approaches; 'we know what's best for our communities.'
- **Invest** in 'growing our own' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforces.
- **Build** accountability into the healthcare system, at individual and system levels.

Webinar 1

Beyond COVID-19: Career pipeline planning for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce

The first webinar in the series was a panel discussion and Q&A featuring Ali Drummond, Donna Murray and Tanya McGregor, facilitated by Kevin Yow Yeh.

The panellists discussed what the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforces; the agility of health workforces in meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities; and the importance of the role of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner in responding to COVID-19 in communities.

The panel also discussed what key stakeholders such as employer groups, tertiary education providers, VET providers and Ahpra need to do differently, or start to do to grow the participation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioners for the future.

[Watch a recording of the webinar online.](#)

Key themes

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners, health workers and health services are diversified, adaptable and know what's best for their communities. The cultural lens they bring to health and wellbeing is critical and needs to be valued.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners are there to support health practitioners and this isn't always well understood and can result in 'turf wars' and gatekeeping about scope of practice. This negatively impacts the care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.
- We need to invest in 'growing our own' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforces for long-term sustainability. There needs to be greater appreciation of the importance of having practitioners who live and work in community and understand background and context of communities, which ultimately creates stronger and more trusting relationships.
- Importance of accommodating the cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioners.
- Racism exists in the healthcare system, and it kills people. There isn't any real accountability – this needs to change.
- More education is needed to educate the health workforce about the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners, the value they bring, and their necessity. Cultural development needs to be embedded in education and CPD - you can't support and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforces without it.
- We need to empower the voices of people who are experiencing racism.
- Solid Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is vital. We need to invest in Indigenous leadership and trust them to lead – take chances when they suggest things that make you uncomfortable; we know what's best for our communities.
- Engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and communities and embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander decision-making at every level. Advisory boards are not decision-making bodies.

- Create safe spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues and community. Nurture space where people can have a community and have the resources to get together. Provide the investment but step back; you don't need to be part of the community/collective.

Tanya McGregor

'[The pandemic] highlighted that the system valued the cultural knowledge and the local knowledge, because we knew we could put a nurse in anywhere, but if they didn't have the cultural knowledge, cultural context, environmental knowledge, it was nearly worthless outside of the clinical component. The value-add of being an Aboriginal person and local, bought so much to it.'



Ali Drummond

'Concerns around the qualifications of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners... this manifestation of racism, this gatekeeping of scope of practice is really gatekeeping of optimising care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.'

The COVID pandemic highlighted these systemic issues we have within workforces sharing space and achieving interprofessional collaboration, one that actually truly centres and listens to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples... we've got to ask questions about other workforces that could share scope of practice... we have to come back to talk about racism... as well as look at models that work...'

Donna Murray

'There is no accountability for real action and eliminating racism. If you're asking settler colonial governments to address their own racism, I don't think it's ever really going to happen... what happens if they don't? ... The laws that currently exist are a slap on the hand... Racism kills people, it kills Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.'



Webinar 2

The cost of failing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioner

In the second webinar of the series, we heard from two speakers who shared their lived experiences of unsafe engagement in the workforce and the impact this has had on them, their careers, their communities and the health system.

A/Prof Kris Rallah-Baker, Jade Renouf-Robertson and Warren Locke shared deeply personal stories and focused on learning and training environments. They discussed the costs of failing to provide culturally safe supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners through the lens of their own experiences.

Participants were asked to take the time to reflect on what they heard in this session and to consider what actions they will take following the stories shared. Participants were also asked to think about the lost economic and labor cost of practitioners who have been pushed out of the health workforce despite their strong desire to be part of it, as well as the larger social cost to the healthcare system and those who depend on it, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and communities.

Due to the personal nature of these stories, the webinar was not recorded.

Key themes

- Entrenched racism experienced from individual practitioners and in system responses when a complaint is made. Active attempts to gaslight, unfairly target, position us (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners) as 'the problem,' and to push us out of the profession.
- Valuable lesson of harnessing the power of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collectives (such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health peak bodies) to gain support for retention, fight the institution, and seek solidarity.
- The psychological, emotional and physical impact racism in the workplace has on Indigenous health practitioners and how this adversely impacts the way they show up to care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients which compromises patient safety.
- For every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioner who has completed their program of study, is registered and is currently practicing – how many are being quietly left behind? We need to do more to address this given the current need for practitioners across all health workforces.
- The need to look critically at workplace systems and how they operate – are they oppressing or supporting Indigenous practitioners? Speak to Indigenous practitioners and identify what you can do by listening with humility.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples must be the ones assessing units of assessment around cultural safety in education programs and practice environments, not non-Indigenous people – this aligns with the self-determining definition of 'cultural safety' committed to by the National Scheme.
- Invest in growing the Indigenous assessor workforce now.

Associate Professor Kris Rallah-Baker



B. MED, AMA(M), MAICD, FRANZCO

Associate Professor Kris Rallah-Baker is Australia's first and currently only Indigenous ophthalmologist. As a proud Yuggera, Warangu and Wiradjuri man, Dr Rallah-Baker is making a permanent footprint in Noosa and the local community.

Kris is a highly respected comprehensive ophthalmologist and is one of the founding members and former President of the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association, an Independent Director on the Federal Board of the Royal Flying Doctors Service, technical advisor

to the Fred Hollows Foundation and Chair of the Vision2020 Indigenous Committee as well as sitting on numerous committees with the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists.

Jade Renouf-Robertson



Jade is a Gubbi Gubbi woman from Brisbane, Queensland. Jade is an Indigenous Student Ambassador for the Oodgeroo Unit at QUT and a Research Assistant for the Australian Centre for Health Law Research. Jade is currently studying a Bachelor of Law and Justice with QUT and holds a special interest in Health Law.

Jade has previously studied a Bachelor of Nursing nearing completion with only two placements remaining to complete her degree. Jade has been an Indigenous Tutor for QUT and a guest speaker at lectures for her cohort including CATSINaM and was the first QUT student to be accepted into the Australian College of Nursing Emerging Leader Program which involved an overseas exchange program and placement at St Luke's Hospital in Bethlehem, New York.

Jade has also been the recipient of multiple scholarships and awards based on academic merit such as; Puggy Hunter Scholarship, Arrow Energy Scholarship and the QUT Law Founders Scholarship

Jade also has also held previous positions with the Federal Government including the Australian Taxation Office and was the Co-Chair responsible for developing the ATO's Indigenous Evergreen Employment Program as well as positions in the Department of Human Services.

Warren Locke



Mulanburra Yidindji and Koko Minni heritage; my people are from the Gordonvale and South Palmer Region in Far North Queensland.

I am currently the Manager of Strategic Pathways, Workforce Strategy Branch, Clinical Planning and Strategic Services Division in the Queensland Department of Health.

I've worked for over 36 years in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community service organisations, local, state, and federal government agencies.

I'm an experienced strategic workforce planner and human resource practitioner (generalist), specialising in engagement and planning specifically with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

I developed and delivered Queensland Health's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework (ATSIHWSF) 2016-2026.

[Webinar 3](#)

Best practice models for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners

In the third event, and final webinar of the series, we shifted the conversation to look at the future, based on self-determination and strength-based principles.

Dr Karen Nicholls and Sam Paxton, in conversation with Kevin Yow Yeh, looked at effective existing models of supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners, including the Newcastle medical program.

From completing programs and training, to successfully graduating, the panellists considered the 'ingredients' of these models and discussed how they can be appropriately re-purposed in training environments and support bodies.

[Watch a recording of the webinar online.](#)

Key themes

- There are currently systemic racist processes that exclude First Nations People who are practitioners and or students. This makes it extremely difficult to live up to their full potential.
- Both implicit and unconscious bias still exists in clinical and education settings and limits autonomy and growth in an Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander practitioner's practice.
- Cultural load impacts an Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander's ability to 'leave their culture at the door:'
 - Immediately deemed the expert on all Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander matters rather than just there to learn
 - Simultaneously expected to disregard cultural knowledge and experience in favour of clinical advice.

- Representation is crucial in the support and retention of Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander practitioners. This could be mentorship programs (both formal and informal) and dedicated culturally safe spaces.
- Universities and employers should be implementing a reconciliation action plan (RAP) or employment strategy to improve representation.
- Healthcare systems weren't built for Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander Peoples.
- Cultural humility is a tool to enable cultural safety.
- Educators and employers need to provide self-determination and agency to Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander practitioners and accept that some business is not their business.
 - Value what First Nations People can bring to the table.
- Employers and educators can work to create a culturally safe environment by undertaking cultural safety training, making space for culture, owning their mistakes and providing self-determination.



Dr Karen Nicholls

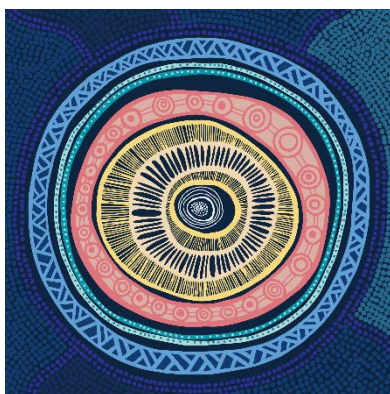
'People hide their identity because they know if they identify (as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander) they will be subject to either covert or even open racism that could limit their ability to perform at their best.'

'Having a safe space where you can go that is culturally appropriate a dedicated space for Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander students ... we could go there, we could be ourselves and we could connect in the ways that we do... and feel safe and know we would not be subjected to racism or flippant comments and allowed us to be ourselves and our best'

Sam Paxton

'We need key stakeholders to back our self-determination, and part of this means knowing your place and knowing that some business isn't your business, some business can only be carried out by ACCHOs and First Nations-led organisations and local communities... and instead transferring that power, control, decision-making resources, back to First Nations people and communities.'





Artwork for the *National Scheme's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Cultural Safety Strategy 2020-2025* was developed by Keisha Thomason from Leon Design.

Ahpra acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and Elders past and present.