

**Address to Congress Lowitja
by Lowitja O'Donoghue**

**Tuesday, 23 March 2010
Aboriginal Health College
Sydney**

Firstly I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land and to thank you for your welcome to country.

When I was first approached about the idea of an Institute to be founded in my name, I'm afraid I wasn't very gracious at all.

In fact, for a moment, I regressed to the 12 year old Lowitja of the Colebrook Home in Adelaide, being told by the Matron that I'd never amount to anything, and that I'd almost certainly 'get into trouble' as soon as I left the Home. And we all know what she meant by that.

And so my first response to the suggestion of a Lowitja Institute was something very 'grown-up' like: 'No way! Don't make me shame! I'm not worthy'.

It recently also occurred to me that having an Institute named after me would mean that half of the country would think that I was dead!

I've always thought that it is a pity at funerals that the deceased can't hear all the wonderful things that are said about them!

So today, even though we are at a birth rather than a funeral, I get that opportunity!

And of course just like at a funeral, you've highlighted all my good points...and ignored my shortcomings!

I eventually came round to the idea of a Lowitja Institute. But I still feel overwhelmed by this honour, especially when I think about organisations like the Hawke Institute or the Don Dunstan Foundation. To be given a similar kind of recognition is very humbling indeed.

But I'm also very proud today to be giving birth in such a creative way, a very different way than the Colebrook matron had in mind I'm sure!

And I'm thrilled that my name will live on in a vitally important initiative such as this one.

I am also very proud to have my name linked with exceptional people whose brilliant work and commitment over many years has made today possible.

There are many people who deserve thanks and recognition for the development of this Institute and its founding body, the Co-operative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health. But tonight I just want to single out four people:

Firstly **Dr John Matthews**, who in 1997 took on the hugely ambitious task of establishing the CRCATH – a Research Centre incorporating two Aboriginal Medical Services – Danila Dilba and Congress – to work alongside a mainstream University health research school.

John was committed to tossing out old methods of working, in favour of a radically different approach. I once commented that he was like a dog with a bone. He was a man of vision and he went about achieving it step by step, tirelessly....doggedly.

One of the people John brought to the table was of course, **Pat Anderson**, who will chair the Interim Board of the Lowitja Institute. Pat has had vast experience in all aspects of Aboriginal health. And of course she co-authored the enormously important and provocative report *Little Children are Sacred*.

Pat is energetic, and fearless. She's a legend. I thank her for her leadership over the years and for taking her vision through to the formation of the Lowitja Institute.

Then there is Professor **Michael Good**, who was at the CRC from its beginnings.

I remember Michael often treading where angels fear to tread. Back then, he had little experience with Aboriginal people or protocols, but he nonetheless managed to endear himself to the whole Board and he got people talking about all sorts of possibilities. He was a true ground breaker...and ice breaker! You will be hearing from him later this evening.

And finally, I would like to thank and acknowledge Professor **Ian Anderson**, the first Aboriginal person to hold a chair in Indigenous Health. I'm so proud of Ian and have learnt so much from him over the years. I'm delighted that he will be the Institute's Research Director.

Ian's hard work and his passionate dedication to closing the gap in health and life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, have been truly inspirational.

I expect you realise that, having named the Institute, *The Lowitja Institute*, that my spirit and energy will be embodied within it! And so it is important to me that the Institute reflects my values and my priorities.

For me, this means the Institute will employ a **courageous group of people**. They will be committed to social justice and equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait people.

There will be a **match between words and action**. I want the Institute to achieve real, tangible and immediate outcomes. Not rarefied research that will never be applied.

Among other things this means that **the point** of research must always be questioned. Whose **interests** does it serve? Who will **benefit**? Who is asking the research questions?

What are **the drivers** of the research – and who is at the steering wheel? Sometimes interested parties will make money available for their own agendas and these agendas then define the research topics.

Aboriginal individuals and organisations **must be fully involved – not just consulted** – in the initiation, design and implementation of the research the Institute undertakes.

And as a matter of priority, there needs to be **Aboriginal participation** at all levels of health service – policy, administration and practice.

It's about **building capacity**, empowering communities and individuals to take responsibility for their own health. It's about bottom-up, not top-down decision making. **Local solutions for local problems.**

And this means we need funding to **massively** increase the Aboriginal health workforce. This has been demonstrated to be crucial for improving Indigenous health outcomes in countries like Canada, the United States and New Zealand. Australia lags **shamefully** behind in this respect.

And I would like to see a vibrant program of **mentoring and support** initiated, to ensure that the energies of Indigenous health workers are sustained and replenished.

We also need a rigorous process of **monitoring outcomes and ensuring accountability.**

Is the Institute willing to do an internal audit of effectiveness that asks basic questions like – **How did we do? And how can we tell?**

For the Institute to be sustainable into the future, it needs to raise LOTS of money.

There is no doubting the generosity of many prominent Australian philanthropists and corporations. But such people inevitably want to put their money and their name to successful ventures based on **real outcomes, genuine accountability and a high community profile.**

The Institute must therefore **disseminate its research findings widely** – not just to other researchers, but to health practitioners, the corporate sector, governments, politicians of all persuasions, and to the public. **Our work must be done...and be seen to be done.**

At the same time the Institute must be careful to gain government and private support **without compromising its own values and intentions.**

The Institute must be alive and known throughout Australia for its **fearless work for change and improvement** in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people.

So there you have it!

I am **delighted** to accept the great honour that you have bestowed upon me.
And it is with great pleasure, that I pass my name to you.

I trust that in your capable hands, the Institute will become widely known for its
excellence and outcomes.

Thank you very much...and Good luck!

Lowitja O'Donoghue

23 March 2010.