



the
Lowitja
INSTITUTE

Australia's National Institute
for Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Health Research

www.lowitja.org.au



Dr Lowitja O’Donoghue

Lowitja O’Donoghue, AC CBE DSG, was born in 1932 at Indulkana, in the remote north-west corner of South Australia, to a Pitjantjatjara mother and an Irish father. When she was just two years old, she and two of her sisters were taken away from their mother by missionaries on behalf of South Australia’s Aboriginal Protection Board.

Renamed ‘Lois’ by the missionaries, she and her sisters grew up at Colebrook Children’s Home and did not see their mother again for more than thirty years. They weren’t allowed to speak their own language or to ask questions about their origins or even about their parents.

Dr O’Donoghue attended Unley General Technical High School in Adelaide and set her sights on becoming a nurse. But, after initial training, she was refused entry to the Royal Adelaide Hospital to continue her studies because she was Aboriginal. She fought the decision—thus beginning her lifelong advocacy for Aboriginal rights—and in 1954 became the first Aboriginal trainee nurse at the hospital. Dr O’Donoghue graduated and became a charge sister at the hospital, where she stayed for ten years.

In the mid-1960s Dr O’Donoghue went to Assam in India to work with the Baptist Overseas Mission, later returning to Australia to continue nursing. However, following the 1967 Referendum that for the first time recognised Aboriginal people as full and equal citizens, she decided to join the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. She accepted a position in the remote South Australian town of Coober Pedy where an aunt and uncle, noticing the family resemblance, recognised her in a local supermarket. Through this chance meeting she was finally reunited with her mother, Lily, who by this time was living in the nearby town of Oodnadatta.

From 1970–72 Dr O’Donoghue was a member of the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement, and later became regional director of the Adelaide Department of Aboriginal Affairs. In 1976, she became the first Aboriginal woman to be awarded an Order of Australia, and a year later was appointed the foundation chair of the National Aboriginal Conference and chair of the Aboriginal Development Commission.

Dr O’Donoghue was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1983 and Australian of the Year in 1984, during which time she became the first and only Aboriginal person ever to address the United Nations General Assembly.

In March 1990 Dr O’Donoghue was appointed the founding chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and, during this time, played a key role in drafting the Native Title legislation that arose from the High Court’s historic Mabo decision.

When she stepped down from this role, Dr O’Donoghue became the inaugural Chair of the newly established Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health (1996–2003), which led on directly to the CRC for Aboriginal Health (2003–2009) and the recently launched CRC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health.

Dr O’Donoghue has received numerous awards and accolades for her work, including winning the Advance Australia award in 1982, being named a National Living Treasure in 1998, and granted a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) in 1999 and a Papal Award, Dame of the Order of St Gregory the Great (DSG), in 2005.

An Honorary Fellow of both the Royal Australian College of Physicians and the Royal College of Nursing, Dr O’Donoghue also holds an Honorary Doctorate of Law from the Australian National University and Notre Dame University, and an Honorary Doctorate from Flinders University, Australian National University, University of South Australia and Queensland University of Technology. She has also been a Professorial Fellow at Flinders University since 2000.

Most recently, Australia’s National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research was named in her honour—and we at the Lowitja Institute feel deeply privileged that she has accepted this honour.

Launching the Lowitja Institute

Edited version of Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue's speech at the launch of the Lowitja Institute – Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research, Parliament House, Canberra, 24 February 2010

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

Minister Warren Snowdon and distinguished guests, all: I am honoured and flattered by your very kind comments...

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!

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 the Lowitja Institute and its founding body, the Cooperative 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 CRC for Aboriginal and Tropical Health—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 Pat Anderson, chair of 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 groundbreaker... 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 Lowitja Institute must be alive and known throughout Australia for its **fearless work for change and improvement in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 Lowitja Institute – Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research will become widely known for its excellence and outcomes.

Thank you very much, and Good Night and Good Luck!

For more information about The Lowitja Institute please go to our website at:

<www.lowitja.org.au>