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GPs CAN HELP CLOSE THE GAP: REPORT

Better identification of Indigenous patients in general practices would improve their access to Medicare benefits such as health checks that could help 'Close the Gap', yet many GPs don't consider ethnicity to be relevant to quality of care, according to a study from The Australian National University.

The study, commissioned by the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute (APCHRI) at ANU and conducted under the auspices of The Lowitja Institute, reviewed the effectiveness of strategies that aim to improve the identification of Indigenous people.

National data and research evidence indicate that less than one third of general practices routinely collect information on the Indigenous status of patients. Improved identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients would support new 'Closing the Gap' initiatives to extend the delivery of routine health checks and chronic disease management services.

Extensive consultations and interviews with Indigenous people, general practice staff and other stakeholders were undertaken as part of the study, as well as case studies of 10 general practice networks.

The study's key recommendations to improve identification of Indigenous patients were to:

- strengthen national accreditation standards for identification and link them to cultural safety training for practice staff;
- promote community awareness of the link between identification and quality of care so that Indigenous people understand why self-identification is important;
- modify medical information management software to ensure that standard questions are being asked and that reminders encourage staff to record Indigenous status; and
- develop practice guidelines on identification and provide training support for staff.

Project leader, Associate Professor Margaret Kelaheer from the University of Melbourne, said supporting voluntary self-identification would help improve Indigenous people's quality of care.

"Identification processes require the development of culturally appropriate approaches and general practices need to provide culturally safe opportunities for people to identify," she said.

"Helping practice staff and the community to understand the link between identification and quality of care is a critical part of this process."

APHCRI Director Robert Wells said the study was an "important first step" towards providing better health care for Indigenous people that could assist the prevention of chronic disease.

The report, 'Improving the Identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Mainstream General Practice' is available from the [APHCRI](#) website and [The Lowitja Institute](#) website.

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