

Racism Undermines Health

Key messages

Racism against Indigenous people is still widespread in Australia.

Racism has a detrimental impact on the health of Indigenous Australians.

There is a need to invest in further research:

- to find effective ways to address systemic racism in public institutions
- to combat inter-personal racism against Indigenous people
- to better understand the nature and impact of racism on Indigenous health.

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What we know about racism (and how it affects health)

- Racism can be thought of as unfair and avoidable actions that (intentionally or unintentionally) result in inequalities between ethnic or racial groups.
- Three out of four Indigenous Australians experience racism from other people in their everyday lives.
- Studies from around the world have found that such experiences of racism are related to poor physical and mental health.¹ In particular, racism has been associated with depression, poor quality of life, psychological distress and substance misuse among Indigenous Australians.
- Systemic racism against Indigenous people continues to be identified in the media, education and welfare system, in the provision of public housing and in the legal/criminal justice systems.
- Indigenous patients are less likely to receive appropriate medical care in Australian hospitals.²
- Racism can be combated by dispelling false beliefs/stereotypes, increasing contact between different ethnic and racial groups and changing institutional policies/practices.³
- There has been very little research aimed at combating racism against Indigenous Australians or addressing its adverse affects.

What more do we need to know?

A symposium held in November 2007 brought together 35 key researchers and policy-makers from Australia and Aotearoa. This symposium formulated a cohesive research agenda to advance our understanding of, and our ability to combat, racism as a threat to Indigenous health. Five key questions were identified as a priority for research:

- What is the prevalence and experience of racism across the life course for Indigenous peoples?
- What impact does racism have on Indigenous health across the life course?
- How can we appropriately assess systemic racism against Indigenous peoples?
- What are the best ways to address systemic racism against Indigenous peoples?
- How can an understanding of the ways in which societal systems produce advantage and positive health outcomes for settler Australians and Pākehā New Zealanders help improve Indigenous health?

Addressing the culture of Australian hospitals

The Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health has funded a project called **Improving the Culture of Hospitals for Indigenous People** that will use a quality improvement approach to address racism in Australian hospitals.

The project, led by Professor Russell Renhard (La Trobe University) will develop a comprehensive understanding of how hospitals can foster an environment that is more culturally appropriate for Indigenous people.

The first stage of this project will document the tools currently being used in hospitals to ensure culturally appropriate service for Indigenous patients. The second stage will use continuous quality improvement processes to develop new and improved tools which, in the third stage, will be implemented in 16 hospitals nationally.

The information gained through this research will enable hospitals to collaborate with Indigenous communities to improve service provision for Indigenous patients and, hence, contribute to improvements in Indigenous health.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Paradies, Y. 2006a, 'A Systematic Review of Empirical Research on Self-reported Racism and Health', *Int.J. Epidemiology*, 35(4): 888–901.
- ² Cunningham, J. 2002, 'Diagnostic and Therapeutic Procedures among Australian Hospital Patients Identified as Indigenous', *MJA*, 176(2):58–62; Cass, A. *et al.* 2004, 'Barriers to Access by Indigenous Australians to Kidney Transplantation: The IMPAKT study', *Nephrology*, 9(4):S144–6; Coory, M. D. & Walsh, W. F. 2005, 'Rates of Percutaneous Coronary Interventions and Bypass Surgery after Acute Myocardial Infarction in Indigenous Patients', *MJA*, 182(10):507–12; and Hall, S. E. *et al.* 2007, 'Treatment Patterns for Cancer in Western Australia: Does being Indigenous make a difference?', *MJA*, 181(4):191–4.
- ³ VicHealth 2007, *More than Tolerance: Embracing Diversity for Health: Discrimination Affecting Migrant and Refugee Communities in Victoria, its Health Consequences, Community Attitudes and Solutions*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.

For a full report: see CRC for Aboriginal Health Discussion Paper No. 4, *The Impact of Racism on Indigenous Health in Australia and Aotearoa: Towards a Research Agenda*, available on the CRCAH website (www.crcah.org.au).

