



the  
**Lowitja**  
INSTITUTE

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

*Incorporating the Cooperative Research Centre  
for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*

# Congress Lowitja 2010 Report

23 AND 24 MARCH 2010 / SYDNEY



This report provides a summary of the proceedings and outcomes of the first ever Congress Lowitja, which was held by The Lowitja Institute – Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research on 23 and 24 March 2010 at the Aboriginal Health College in Sydney's Little Bay.

Congress Lowitja is both a biennial forum and an ongoing virtual network established specifically to encourage stakeholder involvement in the development of the Lowitja Institute's research projects. As such it sits at the very heart of the Institute's *facilitated development approach* to research, in which the users of our research are centrally involved in identifying the priorities for our research agenda.



**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Congress Lowitja delegates outside Aboriginal Health College in Sydney's Little Bay **BELOW:** Warada Dancers performing / Aunty Norma Sims, La Perouse Land Council, who welcomed Congress Lowitja to Country / Sandra Bailey, CEO of the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council, with Pat Anderson, Chair of the Lowitja Institute Interim Board



## Day 1: The opening of Congress

Despite the uncertainties associated with holding such a complex event for the first time, some 170 delegates from a broad cross-section of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector ensured a full house on the opening morning and for the entire duration of the two-day event.

They were there to review the achievements of the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (CRAH), to hear more about the Lowitja Institute's proposed research program, to listen to presentations about proposed research from the new Program Leaders, to build relationships and to find out how participants in Congress Lowitja could contribute to the development of the Lowitja Institute's long-term research agenda.

The morning started with a performance by the **Warada Dancers** on the lawns outside the Aboriginal Health College, followed by a Welcome to Country from **Aunty Norma Sims** of the La Perouse Land Council and an address by **Ms Sandra Bailey**, CEO of event hosts the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council.

### The new Institute – looking backwards, looking forwards

This was followed by the first plenary session and an introductory speech by interim Lowitja Institute Chair **Ms Pat Anderson**, who told delegates that Congress Lowitja had been established 'to provide a venue for you to be involved in, and help set the direction of, our research agenda'.

'Every two years we will come together to discuss, refine and plan for future research that will ensure better health outcomes for our people,' Ms Anderson said. 'We want to hear your views, we want you to challenge us and, most importantly, we want you to share our journey towards a future where there is no longer a health gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and other Australians – in other words, between us and them.'

In her speech Ms Anderson reviewed the achievements of the Lowitja Institute's predecessor organisations, the CRC for Aboriginal and Tropical Health (CRCATH) and the CRAH. She showed how their work had resulted in the successful 2009 bid for extension funding for the new CRC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (CRCATSIH), which will be hosted through to June 2014 by the Lowitja Institute.



Ms Anderson was followed to the podium by **Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue**, AC CBE DSG, after whom the Institute is named in honour of her many achievements in the struggle for Aboriginal rights over the past 50 years. Dr O'Donoghue spoke of the importance of values in research and the need to stay focused on the work required to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

'For me, this means the Institute will employ a courageous group of people,' she said. 'They will be committed to social justice and equity for our 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?'

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

### Building on CRCAH research

The second plenary session was presented by the Lowitja Institute Director of Research and Innovation **Professor Ian Anderson**, who highlighted the key learnings and achievements of the CRCAH and its partners. He also discussed how CRCAH research had been used to guide the design and implementation of the Lowitja Institute/CRCATSIH's new research agenda.

However, Professor Anderson reminded his audience of the many challenges and impediments still confronting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector, including the funding overburden afflicting community controlled health services and the fractured nature of service provision flowing from Australia's federal political system.

'It is vital that we continue growing our networks and implementing new communication tools to cut through with our research findings,' he said. 'We need to be consistent in our approach and clever in our dissemination.'

Following Professor Anderson's presentation, the afternoon session was taken up by break-out presentations from CRCAH Project Leaders around the achievements and legacy of the CRCAH's research programs, with a focus on specific outcomes in the following areas:

- Structural barriers to improving health
- Social barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health
- Building capacity
- Working in effective partnerships
- Improving services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Knowledge exchange.

The day wrapped up with refreshments at the nearby St Michael's Golf Club and a performance by Indigenous musician, **Glen Doyle**.

**TOP LEFT:** Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue addressing Congress Lowitja on Day 1

**BOTTOM LEFT:** Lowitja O'Donoghue portrait (by Robert Hannaford, original at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra)

BELOW: Delegates mingle over lunch / Professor Ian Anderson, Research and Innovation Director / Delegates listen to Sandra Bailey



## Day 2: The Lowitja Institute Research Agenda

Where Day 1 was a review of the hard work that led up to the establishment of the Lowitja Institute, the focus of Day 2 was very firmly on the Institute's future research agenda as set out in the three new program areas:

- **PROGRAM 1: HEALTHY START, HEALTHY LIFE** – research focused on reducing the chronic illness risk across the life-course, and improving early intervention and chronic illness management.
- **PROGRAM 2: HEALTHY COMMUNITIES AND SETTINGS** – research focused on the capacity of local communities and organisations to develop interventions that address the determinants of health across a range of local sectors and settings.

- **PROGRAM 3: ENABLING POLICY AND SYSTEMS** – research enabling the reform of policy and programs, workforce development, and whole-of-government approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

**Professor Anderson** set the agenda for the day with an opening presentation entitled 'Providing the know-how for Closing the Gap: The new research agenda', in which he detailed the thinking behind the new program areas. He said the three programs between them would target 80 per cent of the known factors underlying the health gap, and would integrate a research focus on clinical processes, the determinants of health and upstream systems.

Professor Anderson said the Lowitja Institute would use its predecessors' hard-won experience of developing effective interventions and

successfully managing research transfer over the past 13 years to inform its work agenda, particularly in its knowledge diffusion strategy, its workforce development activities and the development and uptake of tools and resources. He also outlined some of the initial research projects that would be commencing in each of the program areas.

In **Program 1**, research would be undertaken to:

- extend the breadth of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) initiatives developed as part of the CRCAH's previous ABCD project;
- implement maternal and child health interventions; and
- develop interventions for known risk factors, such as tobacco consumption.

In **Program 2**, research would focus on multi-faceted health promotion interventions, including:

- the Shepparton project – an eight-year collaboration with community organisations in Victoria’s Goulburn Valley;
- the development of measurement systems for health and social development; and
- new intervention models that are community rather than organisation-focused.

**Program 3** would address upstream barriers to health gain, with projects targeting:

- systems reform in the areas of regulation and funding to cut complexity;
- improving performance measurement and contract management; and
- boosting the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce.

Delegates spent the rest of the morning attending break-out sessions around the new program areas where they were able to hear from the Program Leaders, provide input into refining research approaches and identify remaining gaps in each program’s proposed suite of projects.

## Congress Lowitja membership

After lunch the focus moved to organisational and technical issues, with presentations from both **Pat Anderson** and Lowitja Institute legal adviser **Kerrin Anderson** about how Congress Lowitja would function. Pat Anderson emphasised the broad aims of Congress, being to:

- involve members in a national network with a strong focus on improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health;
- encourage members to contribute to the Lowitja Institute’s research agenda through identifying new research and capacity building needs, as well as reviewing the development and progress of existing projects;
- give members opportunities to participate in the biennial Congress Lowitja and other activities, such as roundtables, workshops and courses; and
- provide members with research results that will contribute to greater efficiency and effectiveness in their work in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

Delegates were invited to participate in a facilitated discussion about how this would work in practice, and how Congress itself could evolve to enhance stakeholder participation in research and training activities.

Among the issues canvassed by delegates were limits on membership, voting rights, membership costs, input into board decision-making processes, the establishment of a Congress executive committee and the need for

transparency. Many of the key points and ideas emerging from this discussion have since been taken up by the Lowitja Institute Interim Board as it moves to finalise Congress Lowitja bylaws and operational arrangements.

Details of the structure, costs, benefits and operations of Congress Lowitja, along with a formal invitation to become a permanent member of Congress, will be sent out to delegates and other stakeholders once this process is completed in the second half of 2010.

## The Congress dinner

With the formal business over, delegates welcomed the opportunity to relax and engage in some final networking at the official Congress dinner held at the Stamford Hotel, with entertainment provided by the evergreen **Jimmy Little** and super smooth duo Brendon Boney and Tessa Nuku, otherwise known as **Microwave Jenny**.

Speaking at the dinner, both **Pat Anderson** and **Ian Anderson** paid tribute to the commitment and enthusiasm of all the Congress Lowitja participants.

‘One of the most gratifying aspects has been the depth of experience and expertise of the participants who have come from across the country,’ Ms Anderson said. ‘Their insights and generosity have made this inaugural Congress a great success and this bodes well for the future.’

‘We often talk about the emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in health research,’ Professor Anderson said. ‘What we have seen over the past two days is that this leadership has well and truly arrived.’

## Feedback

An evaluation by those attending Congress Lowitja found that participants came from every State and Territory except Tasmania, although the majority (22.7%) were from Victoria and the Northern Territory. Some 37 per cent of respondents were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and some 57 per cent represented academic/research organisations.

As a cross-section, there were representatives from 13 community organisations, 14 government organisations, 29 NGOs and 110 representatives from academic/research institutions, with another two delegates representing corporate organisations.

Of the respondents, 64 per cent agreed that 'The Congress Lowitja presentation has assisted me in understanding the Lowitja Institute', while 59 per cent strongly agreed that 'I would encourage my organisation to become a formal member of the Congress'. Interest was evenly split between the three program areas.

### **In terms of what they liked best about Congress Lowitja, respondents said the following:**

*'The inspirational first morning. Felt good. This is a good mob to be involved in. Doing good stuff.'*

*'Apart from great venue and food, the convenors were helpful and approachable, but I would have to say – the merging of minds re Aboriginal health. Fantastic!'*

*'It provided a great opportunity to network with other Aboriginal researchers around topics such as: project success, project difficulties, similarities, gaps, etcetera.'*

*'It was a great space to network, discuss research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, spotlight excellent research approaches and designs.'*

## Find out more

To find out more about what happened at Congress Lowitja 2010, visit the Congress section of the Lowitja Institute website at [www.lowitja.org.au/congress-lowitja-2010](http://www.lowitja.org.au/congress-lowitja-2010). It contains the complete Congress program and most of the speeches and presentations, along with Congress media releases.

For more information about Congress Lowitja itself, or to become a formal member, please contact our Stakeholder Management Officer, Penelope Smith, at [penelope.smith@lowitja.org.au](mailto:penelope.smith@lowitja.org.au), or 03 8341 5505.

We look forward to welcoming you to the next Congress Lowitja in 2012.





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