

## **The Lowitja Institute Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Disability Research Workshop**

**Melbourne, 4 October 2017**

### **Background Paper**

The Lowitja Institute is Australia's national institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, named in honour of its Patron, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG. Established in January 2010, the Lowitja Institute operates on key principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, a broader understanding of health that incorporates wellbeing, and the need for the work to have a clear and positive impact.

The Institute hosts the Lowitja Institute Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health CRC which is funded by the Australian Government Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) Programme. The history of the Lowitja Institute CRC dates back to 1997 when the first CRC for Aboriginal and Tropical Health was established.

The Lowitja Institute has three research programs, each supported by an expert program committee:

- Community capability and the social determinants of health
- Health workforce to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health
- Health policy and systems.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disability was identified as a high priority at a meeting of the combined Lowitja Institute program committees held in Melbourne on 9 December 2016. This priority covers all research program areas of the Institute, aligning closely with the social determinants of health program, particularly in the realm of agency and control at all levels for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability are often further disadvantaged by experiences of systemic and ongoing racism and ableism. Current government policies, particularly the implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), are driving significant change by re-defining interactions and relationships between services and clients. This climate adds to the uncertainty and complexity of an already challenging reality for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability.

The purpose of this workshop is broader than solely discussing NDIS issues. The intention of this workshop is to guide future research to provide valuable knowledge to policy makers and disability services, inform policy and practice, and lead to better health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability.

Below is a summary of the primary issues that were identified in a recent literature review in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disability. This summary is not intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of these issues, but rather aims to provide a platform for focused discussions that will lead to the development of research questions. These questions will form the basis of the application process for the Lowitja Institute Disability Research grants.

## Summary of Issues

### **The silent social determinant of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**

The First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN) describe disability as the silent social determinant of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities describes disability as an 'evolving concept', and identifies a person with a disability as including those with: long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others' (Social Justice Commissioner 2015:105).

This approach to disability, is based on a social model, recognising capabilities and not disabilities, as opposed to a medical model that focuses on diagnosis.

### **Defining disability through the lens of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders culture –an identity dilemma**

The word *disability* does not exist in Aboriginal languages, instead, there are different terms for specific conditions. As a result, a person's identity is not absorbed by their disability, rather it is one facet of a multitude of roles and affiliation to community and culture. For an Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander person, the need to identify as having a disability may impose a new identity that can potentially distinguish them from their community and culture. This issue intensifies with the introduction of the NDIS, as it requires people to identify as having a disability to access funding and services (National Disability & Carer Alliance 2013:1).

### **Ableism and racism**

An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person with a disability does not only carry the burden of disability and the discrimination associated with their impairment (ableism), but also long standing systemic discrimination and racism. Disability and socio-economic disadvantage that is often experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has a circular relationship. Socio-economic disadvantage is associated with risk factors that increase the likelihood of acquiring a disability, while living with a disability further entrenches socio-economic disadvantage (Social Justice Commissioner 2015:104).

### **High prevalence of predictive factors of disability amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more likely to have a disability than non-Indigenous Australians. This is largely due to the increased likelihood of predictive factors including low birth weight, chronic disease, and social determinants such as poorer living conditions and limited access to health care.

These factors further increase the risk of homelessness, and encounters with the criminal justice system and child protection (Biddle et al. 2014: 29).

When compared with non-Indigenous Australians, Aboriginal people have high prevalence of impairment occurring at an earlier age, may have complex health issues and needs, and are likely to be caring for another person with a disability.

Previous negative experiences and fear of having children taken away, or of being judged, are also barriers for accessing supports and services. This is exacerbated by a lack of culturally safe service provision.

### **Adopting a strength-based approach in research and practice**

The Lowitja Institute adopts a strength-based approach to research and believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have an untapped knowledge and best-practice models that can inform policy and practice across the sector, in particular, in the area of inclusive participation in community and support systems.

Through this work, and with the collaboration of researchers, community, advocacy groups and policy makers, the opportunities to make a real difference in this area are significant. The discourse surrounding disability is high on the national agenda, and this presents an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research in this area to be particularly relevant, well-received, and acted upon in the broader national context.

## References

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