



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*

24 December 2013

Indigenous Jobs and Training Review  
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet  
One National Circuit  
BARTON ACT 2600

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Dear Sir

The Lowitja Institute welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the **Indigenous Jobs and Training Review**. We strongly believe that full participation in economic life is essential for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Conversely, good health and wellbeing is vital for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate in the workforce.

### **About The Lowitja Institute**

The Lowitja Institute is Australia's only national health research organisation with a sole focus on the health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Lowitja Institute, Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research, is dedicated to achieving equity in health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through innovative, collaborative and inclusive research.

The Institute works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, Australia's leading health research institutions and policymakers to ensure that health research is targeted towards improving the health and lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is important that our research outcomes are disseminated widely through knowledge exchange, and that promising interventions identified through research are implemented and evaluated.

Further information about the Lowitja Institute can be found at [www.lowitja.org.au](http://www.lowitja.org.au)

We believe the following issues are important for consideration by the Review Panel:

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## Importance of individual health

There is a clear link between a person's health and productivity. As well as understanding that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the worst health of any population group in Australia, there should also be a clear understanding of the Aboriginal definition of health:

*“Aboriginal health” means not just the physical well-being of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being, thereby bringing about the total well-being of their community. It is a whole-of-life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life.<sup>1</sup>*

This understanding of health encompasses a different worldview to the Western perspective and requires that a range of factors are in harmony in order to be in a state of health.

The Lowitja Institute has had a long association with the Family Wellbeing (FWB) Program.<sup>2, 3</sup> This program is premised on the fact that historical processes of colonisation dissociated Indigenous Australians from cultural traditions into a competitive and individuated Western society, resulting in the breakdown of extended families and clans, traditions and customs. For many people, this caused untold damage on their inner power and strength; disconnection with extended family for parenting; divisions between men and women; deep anger, sadness and depression – all reinforced by racism, marginalisation and entrenched disadvantage. Such profound losses have had enormous impact on the social and emotional wellbeing – and hence the health – of the First Australians. The FWB program focuses on personal development and capacity enhancement through strategies such as learning from mistakes; acceptance of personal responsibility; communication skills; confidence to seek help; understanding the danger and warning signs for suicide; and learning to overcome personal problems. At the core of FWB is empowerment, defined as the capacity by which individuals, organisations and communities can gain control over their lives to improve wellbeing and quality of life.

In order to successfully recruit and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in workforces across Australia, workplaces and businesses will need to have a deep appreciation of these issues. We know it is important that employment training programs focus on the technical aspects of job-readiness, such as time management, industry related skills, literacy/numeracy, job application process, etc. But at the same time, we would urge employers to understand that for some people, improved social and emotional wellbeing, including feeling good about themselves and being confident about their potential, can be the first step towards gaining and holding down a job.

***Recommendation: That employers have a clear understanding that First Australians view health differently and that Aboriginal health goes beyond physical health.***

<sup>1</sup> National Aboriginal Health Strategy, 1989

<sup>2</sup> McEwan, A & Tsey, K. 2009, The Role of Spirituality in Social and Emotional Wellbeing Initiatives: The Family Wellbeing Program at Yarrabah, Discussion Paper No. 7, CRCIAH, Darwin. - See <http://www.lowitja.org.au/family-wellbeing-program-empowerment-research#sthash.Z4RPDHHT.dpuf>

<sup>3</sup> Strategic support for strengthening the JCU/UQ Empowerment Research Program – The Lowitja Institute website - <http://www.lowitja.org.au/strategic-support-jcu-uq>

## **The Health Workforce**

We believe that the Aboriginal health sector has demonstrated significant successes in terms of recruitment, support and retention of a technical and professional health workforce of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

While there is still some way to go in terms of bringing the Indigenous health workforce up to par,<sup>4</sup> a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professional organisations have been leaders in terms of building the professional health workforce. Aboriginal doctors, nurses, allied health workers, Aboriginal health workers, psychologists, have developed highly effective working relationships with their stakeholder partners such as governments, health and medical schools; health and medical bodies; and primary/secondary/tertiary education bodies. Establishing trusting relationships and partnerships have been vitally important for the building of mutual understanding and laying the foundation for the development of these professions. Strategies have included establishing career pathway programs scholarship programs, traineeships, mentoring and networking programs, as well as providing collegiate support for one another.

It should be noted too that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce has a key role in closing the gap in health outcomes by making services more culturally appropriate, accessible and by bringing a unique understanding to health delivery for their people.

***Recommendation: That the Review takes into consideration the strategies that Aboriginal health sector has demonstrated in terms of successfully building a professional Indigenous workforce.***

## **The interdependent nature of health, education and employment**

It is a well recognised fact that poor social and economic circumstances affect health and wellbeing. In order to participate in economic life, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must have equitable access to health services, proper housing, environmental health infrastructure, and educational opportunities.

If we are to close the gap in health, educational and employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians, it is important that governments and the business sector understand the links between health, education and employment.

***Recommendation: That in developing strategies for better employment opportunities for Australia's First Australians, a clear understanding of the links between employment, health and education and that these sectors work together in a holistic context.***

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<sup>4</sup> ABS Census Data 2011 – quoted on Department of Health website - shows that approximately 1.8% of Australia's health workforce consists of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.  
<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/work-review-australian-government-health-workforce-programs-toc~chapter-5-supporting-aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-health-workforce~chapter-5-context#footnote>

## Cultural competence in the workplace

We have learnt from experience in the Aboriginal health sphere, that cultural competence and cultural safety is critical for successful recruitment and retainment. Similar principles apply to the broader Indigenous workforce.

Cultural competence goes beyond attendance at cultural awareness training. Cultural competence ensures that individuals and systems are aware of the impact of their own cultural values on others' and that they have some knowledge of, respect and sensitivity towards the cultural needs of others. Cultural competence enables a person to successfully translate cultural knowledge and understanding in a practical context.

It is important for executive staff to commit to and demonstrate leadership in terms of cultural competence. Naturally, staff will take their cues from managers and leaders so it is vital that there is a vision led from the top of organisation in terms of understanding and valuing cultural difference.

The Lowitja Institute's research has shown that racism makes people sick.<sup>5</sup> This of course has implications for successful retention of Aboriginal people in the workforce. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be free from institutional and personal racism and discrimination in the workplace. A culturally competent workforce and culturally safe workplace will go some way toward addressing potential workplace racism.

***Recommendations: That in developing strategies for better employment opportunities for Australia's First Australians***

- (a) the importance of cultural competence is clearly understood for successful retention of the workforce; and***
- (b) employers understand that racism affects peoples' health and the consequential risks of racism and discrimination to successful recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.***

### Strengths-based Approach

Hand-in-hand with cultural competence is the need to understand the strengths and the potential that Indigenous Australians bring to the workforce. A strength-based approach means understanding that people have existing skills and competencies and the potential to learn more. The strengths-based perspective sits diametrically opposite the deficit perspective, which focuses on stereotypes, problems and pre-conceived ideas. Again, the strengths-based perspective must be led from the top of organisations.

*"..... at our best, we bring our traditional principles and practices – respect, generosity, collective benefit, collective ownership – to our daily expression of our identity and culture in a contemporary context. When we are empowered to do this, and where systems facilitate this reclamation, protection and promotion, we are healthy, well and successful and our communities thrive."<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Ferdinand, A., Paradies, Y. & Kelaher, M. 2012, Mental Health Impacts of Racial Discrimination in Victorian Aboriginal Communities: The Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) Experiences of Racism Survey, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne

<sup>6</sup> Professor Ngjare Brown, quoted in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023, page 9 [http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/B92E980680486C3BCA257BF0001BAF01/\\$File/health-plan.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/B92E980680486C3BCA257BF0001BAF01/$File/health-plan.pdf)

***Recommendation: That Indigenous employment policy***

- ***recognises that success will depend on genuine engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;***
- ***acknowledges cultural difference and***
- ***ensures employers adopt a strengths-based approach to committing to such programs.***

**Overarching Principles**

Those of us who have worked in Aboriginal health for many decades have worked by the following guiding principles. We believe that many of these principles have broader application for businesses in committing to successful employment strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

1. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander definition and understanding of health incorporates the historical, cultural, spiritual, social, as well as the physical dimension of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health;
2. The importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership;
3. Human rights principles are reflected in all work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health;
4. Genuine partnership and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and communities are vital if we are to make lasting change;
5. The skills and ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations to make genuine decisions about their own lives are respected;
6. The capacities of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, government, service systems, organisations and the workforce are enhanced;
7. The development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce is valued;
8. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history is recognised and valued;
9. Diversity of culture, location, etc. is understood;
10. Strengths-based approach versus a 'deficit model'.

We believe that emerging employment strategies should reflect the ambitions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have for their economic participation. If we are genuine about closing the gap in the employment, education and health outcomes, and consequently for Australia to fully mature as a nation, it will require courage on the part of politicians, commitment on the part of bureaucrats, genuine consultation and relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and particularly, leadership on the part of employers and businesses.

Yours sincerely,



**Lyn Brodie**  
Chief Executive Officer