

The Lowitja Institute, Carlton, Melbourne

Official Lowitja Institute CRC launch & office opening

by

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**Chairperson,
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Melbourne

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, colleagues and friends.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all here today as we launch the Lowitja Institute Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health CRC and formally open this wonderful space.

Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered this morning — the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. Thank you Auntie Joy Wandin Murphy for your very generous welcome to country and for the warm embrace you have shared with us in the smoking ceremony that we've all just enjoyed.

You have made us feel very much at home here in Melbourne since we established the Lowitja Institute here in January 2010, and very much hope that Melbourne will remain our base for many years to come.

I thank Ms Kelly O'Dwyer MP for agreeing to officiate at our event this morning on behalf of the Prime Minister (we'll hear from Kelly again in a moment to officially launch the CRC and declare our new office open).

I also acknowledge the Hon Shayne Neumann MP, the Hon Warren Snowdon MP, Professor Marcia Langton, Professor Ian Anderson, Mr Alex Jackomos and Mr Neville Stevens, Chairperson of the CRC Board. I acknowledge all our long-time supporters and friends, and our former CEO, Ms Lyn Brodie.

Unfortunately, our patron, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue, could not join us here this morning. Lowitja has been with us from the very beginning of our CRC journey and was, in fact, the Chairperson of the original

CRC for Aboriginal and Tropical health back in 1997. She is an inspiration to us all and we are of course extremely honoured that this CRC bears her name.

Lowitja sends her best wishes for us this morning, and is certainly with us in spirit.

Today marks another giant step in that CRC journey.

Since 1997, three CRCs have helped change the way research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health is done.

When I first became involved back in the 1990s, it was the researchers who held most of the power in the Aboriginal health research domain. They decided what research would be done, how it would be done and how the findings would be distributed. Now, to me and to the community health sector as a whole, this looked very much like another form of colonisation.

Remember, this was only 20 years ago.

So we changed that.

Beginning with the first CRC we instituted a new way of commissioning projects, and that was to:

- Establish our roundtable process, to identify research priorities with community, research and policy-makers
- then invite research proposals that fit these priorities
- work collaboratively with key stakeholders to turn the most promising proposals into fully fledged projects, which we then fund
- build up the research skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander peoples in that process.

At the same time we have helped mentor and train an entire generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and health workers, and provided support and encouragement to the community controlled health sector.

Our guiding principle has always been that, in order to improve our health, we need to create our own solutions rather than have them imposed upon us. That means we need to have a greater stake in health service delivery, research and policymaking. In this we have made substantial progress – but we are still far from the finishing line.

With life expectancy for Australia's First Peoples still languishing 11 years behind our fellow countrymen and women, we clearly have our work cut out for us.

In May 2013, we welcomed the Australian Government's announcement that we had been granted a further five years' funding under the CRC Program, which will underpin our operations through to 2019.

The challenge for us now is to refine our research programs and develop the institutional infrastructure that will secure our future beyond 2019.

So what are our priorities?

During the life of this Lowitja Institute CRC

- we will focus on developing a greater understanding of how individuals, children, families and communities can neutralise the negative impacts of the social determinants of health, and

maximise the positive influences such as culture, community and family

- we will commence some dialogue on the cultural determinants of health, which is vitally important for understanding the links between health and culture
- we will look at a subject close to my heart: early childhood development. We know how important early childhood is to subsequent health and much work has previously gone into developing key interventions in this area for Aboriginal children, their families and carers. We aim to identify the most effective ways of implementing these interventions at a national scale
- we will help identify the needs of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce, and how to nurture its development to ensure good representation of our people throughout all areas of the health system.
- we will continue to support capacity development initiatives to train the next generation of researchers in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health with scholarships to support entry-level research skills training as well as postgraduate students and professional development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research leaders
- we will continue to provide evidence to support improvements in health policy and systems, where our earlier work uncovered complex administrative and governance environments that prevented the effective delivery of health care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

- We will continue to build an evidence base to establish sound policy for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

As with our predecessor CRCs, our work encompasses much more than research. We have supported knowledge exchange and research translation activities throughout the health sector since our first CRC. If there is anything that can help make a positive difference to our people's health, we want to get the message out there whether or not we have been involved in the underlying work.

In this regard a highlight of our previous CRC's term has been the biennial Congress Lowitja. Since the first Congress Lowitja was held in 2010 this event has established itself as a key knowledge exchange forum in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector. Congress Lowitja provides a unique opportunity for community service providers, policymakers and researchers working within the sector to share ideas and plan for the future. I'm very much looking forward to our next Congress Lowitja in 2016, which will be an international conference held here in Melbourne.

Much of what we do ultimately comes down to engagement and collaboration. We are the sum of our partnerships with community controlled organisations, universities, research institutions and government and we will continue to grow and nurture those relationships with our CRC participants and by establishing an Australia-wide faculty of expert stakeholders.

Together, we will strengthen each other's work and deliver our long cherished vision of equity in health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We are supported by research leaders who are recognised

authorities in their respective fields; we have a great team, excellent partners, and good friends. We also have strong leadership.

Our CEO, Mr Romlie Mokak, joined us in July this year from the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association, where he spent nine successful years. He has the knowledge, the experience and the wisdom we need to lead us to the next level and realise our vision of a fully independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research institute. We are in good hands.

Last but not least, we have a wonderful base in the form of our new premises. The new Lowitja Institute office is an important and exciting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and knowledge space: respectful of the wisdom of our ancestors yet contemporary, located in the heart of inner city Melbourne; a space to deliver great research into the future.

It is also a space where we have room to grow and room to welcome our partners for roundtables and other collaborative work.

A very special thank you to Mr Jefa Greenaway who is the only registered Aboriginal architect practising in Victoria. Congratulations, Jefa, on a job well done.

Thank you to everyone whose hard work has contributed to our success over the past two decades. There are too many to acknowledge by name but without you we would not be here today with such a bright future before us.

Finally, thank you to all of you here today, friends, colleagues and distinguished guests and all for sharing with us this special day in the life of the Lowitja Institute Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health CRC.