

Position Statement



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*

30 November 2012

Standing Together to Improve Mental Health

Response to the National Mental Health Commission First Annual Report Card

The Lowitja Institute congratulates the National Mental Health Commission on its first Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. We welcome the Commission's call to stand together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders to work to improve the resilience, physical and mental health of our people.

The report reminds us what we have known for decades—that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people suffer unacceptably higher rates of mental illness and suicide. We should not lose sight of the fact that poor mental health outcomes are linked to factors that include: inter-generational grief, loss and trauma, the effects of colonisation and dispossession, contact with the criminal justice system, as well as poor education, employment and housing outcomes. This, of course, then feeds into a vicious cycle of disadvantage that further exacerbates mental and physical health issues.

Mental health and social and emotional wellbeing is a priority research area for the Lowitja Institute. A recent study and report, funded by the Lowitja Institute in conjunction with VicHealth and *beyondblue*, found that Aboriginal Victorians suffer appalling levels of racism that can lead to severe psychological distress. There can be no doubt that racism and discrimination have an impact on a person's mental health and wellbeing. It is time now for governments to formally recognise that racism is a health risk.

The Lowitja Institute has, and continues to support, a number of projects relating to mental health including the Australian Mental Health Initiative (AIMhi) in the Northern Territory that aims to improve mental health outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their families. Another is the Let's Start project, a resilience-promoting intervention program that began on the Tiwi Islands and continues with some schools in the NT. We are also supporting an Aboriginal psychologist to undertake a PhD around trauma recovery in urban Aboriginal communities. Other relevant projects can be found on our website at: www.lowitja.org.au/social-and-emotional-wellbeing.

We also call for mental health to be given priority in the next Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aboriginal Health Plan. As such, the Lowitja Institute endorses the development of an adequately funded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing Plan.

Further, we support the Commission's call for mental health to become a separate COAG Close the Gap target. This would ensure that Federal, State and Territory governments treat mental health as a priority, and give it the cross-government oversight it requires.

Mental ill-health cannot be healed in isolation, as our mental health is inextricably linked to our physical health. It is not an 'add on' or a postscript. It requires a holistic, integrated and collaborative effort on the part of politicians, bureaucrats, health professionals and the broader community to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health organisations to improve mental health outcomes for our people.