



the  
**Lowitja**  
Institute

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

## **Proposed closure of Western Australian remote communities Statement by the Lowitja Institute**

**11 March 2015**

The Lowitja Institute has grave concerns about the Prime Minister's decision to back the plan in Western Australia to close remote communities and remove people from their lands.

If Australia is to Close the Gap in life expectancy and health outcomes, our leaders must fully appreciate the Aboriginal understanding of health:

*The Aboriginal concept of health is holistic, encompassing mental health and physical, cultural and spiritual health. Land is central to wellbeing. This holistic concept does not merely refer to the 'whole body' but in fact is steeped in the harmonised inter-relations which culturally constitute wellbeing. These inter-relating factors can be categorised largely as spiritual, environmental, ideological, political, social, economic, mental and physical. Crucially it must be understood that when the harmony of these inter-relations is disrupted, Aboriginal ill-health will persist.<sup>1</sup>*

As this definition of Aboriginal health states, being on country is more than a lifestyle choice. It is the essence of life itself.

There is a strong body of evidence in Australia that supports the link between land, culture and wellbeing. For example, evidence tells us that the effects of colonisation have limited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from having agency over their lives which is vital for health and wellbeing. The continuation of cultural practice, including land management is known to be protective of good health and social and emotional wellbeing. This brings into question the wisdom of removing people from land.

*The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013–2023*, developed following extensive consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and endorsed by this Government, identifies the centrality of culture and wellbeing in the health of our people. If we are to accept this notion, we must understand that culture, land, community and identity are intrinsically linked.

Finally, we must heed the lessons of history. The 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report into the Stolen Generations was a momentous lesson in the danger of removing people from their land and culture.

As Australia's Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, the Lowitja Institute would strongly caution any government against such action. We would urge all Australian political leaders to genuinely listen to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and reflect on the failure of past policies and the current health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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<sup>1</sup> Ways Forward: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health policy national consultancy report, Swan and Raphael, 1995

## **ABOUT THE LOWITJA INSTITUTE**

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. The Institute was established in 2010, emerging from a 14-year history of Cooperative Research Centres funded by the Australian Government CRC Program.

Since 1997, the Institute (and its predecessor CRC organisations) has led a substantial reform agenda in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research by working with communities, researchers and policy makers, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people setting the agenda and driving the outcomes. At present, we work in partnership with twenty participants around Australia, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health organisations; State, Territory and Australian government departments; and academic research institutions. Together, we aim to achieve demonstrable impact in better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through research, capacity building, workforce development, knowledge exchange and research translation.