



## Position Statement

May 2021

# Embedding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner Workforce

## NAATSIHWP's Position

Greater support and investment is needed to embed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner Workforce as a vital, valued and professional component of Australia's health care system.

The workforce was established by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people close to a century ago in response to the need for the delivery of geographically accessible and culturally safe comprehensive primary health care and clinical health care.

With evidence<sup>1</sup> directly connecting the workforce to improved health and wellbeing outcomes across the life course, its emergence provides perhaps one of the most significant demonstrations of how inherent self-determination is to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

To enable Australia's health care system to capably respond to the needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community there is a genuine occupational requirement to ensure this workforce comprises only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. NAATSIHWP's definition of these professions is consistent with this requirement. The workforce is critical to:

- › addressing the underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in health care<sup>2, 3</sup>
- › safeguarding access to culturally safe and responsive clinical and primary health care<sup>4,5,6,7,8</sup> and
- › ensuring the health care system can capitalise on the protective benefits of the cultural determinants of health<sup>9,10</sup>.

The workforce delivers education, employment and health outcomes and offers a significant return on investment. Yet, despite the vital role the workforce plays it continues to be under-supported, under-recognised and under-utilised<sup>11</sup>. Health system bias, an overall lack of understanding about the role and value of the workforce and ad-hoc inconsistent workforce policies continue to hinder the expansion and development of the workforce nationally.

These issues are not new and were first raised over a decade ago<sup>12</sup>. Given the positive sustainable cross-portfolio outcomes the workforce delivers NAATSIHWP considers too little is being done to support its growth and professional utilisation.

Efforts to close the gap between the health and wellbeing outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and the broader population must recognise and position the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner workforce as a priority for investment. We call on all stakeholders with an interest in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing outcomes to:

- › improve their understanding of the significant role this workforce plays
- › promote the development and implementation of nationally cohesive, consistent policies and programs to help address barriers to the growth and professional utilisation of the workforce and
- › recognise the workforce as a means of achieving long term positive sustainable health, education and employment outcomes.

## The unique role of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner Workforce

As the only culturally based health professions underpinned by national training and regulation in the world Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners play an essential and unique role in Australia's health care system. Across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities this workforce is renowned as a vital and reliable community resource critical to health and wellbeing.

With lived experience in and a deep understanding of the communities they serve Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners provide a high standard of culturally safe and responsive care, act as cultural brokers and health system navigators. Their combination of clinical, cultural, social and linguistic skills delivers an engagement capability and community reach that sets them apart from others working in the health care system. Working on the frontline they are rarely part of the fly in fly out workforce but instead live and work in the communities they serve.

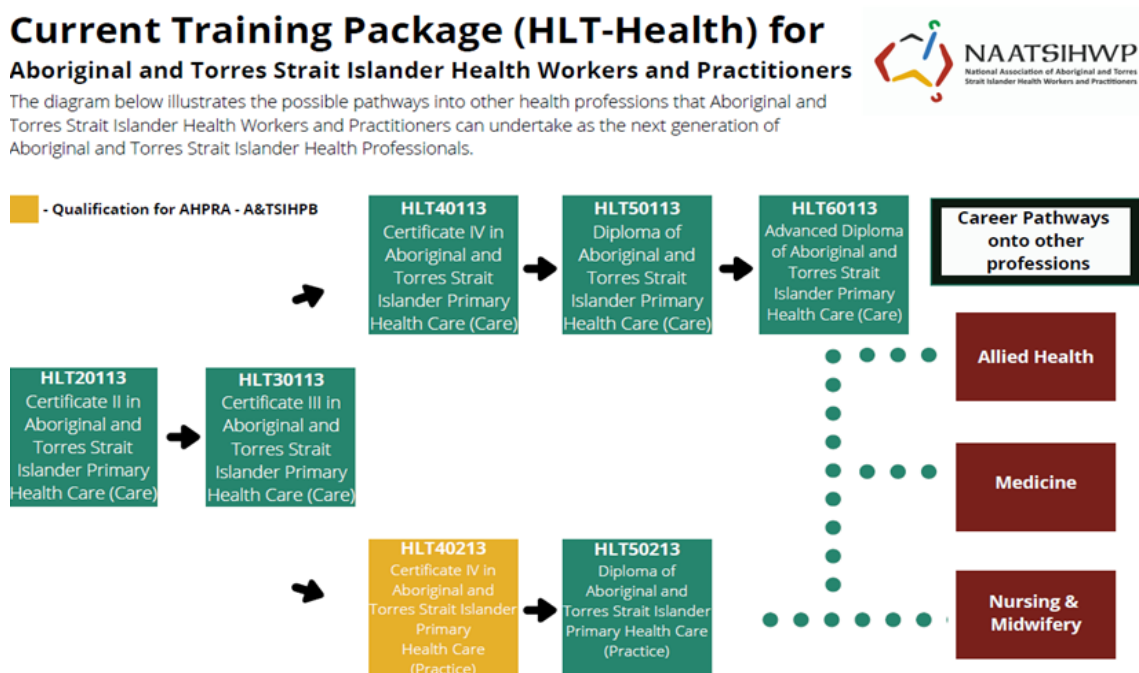
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners receive practical, comprehensive primary health care training through the vocational education and training system. Importantly, this is designed to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with vital entrance level pathways for careers in the health sector (please see **Figure 1** below), as well as, access to culturally safe care.

Of the two professions, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners in particular have a high level of clinical skills and are trained to work autonomously. They have been required to meet practice standards and register under the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) national registration and accreditation scheme with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practice Board since 2012.

Consistent with the NAATSIHWP definitions of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners the eligibility requirements and qualification descriptions for entrance into courses under the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker Training Package and registration with AHPRA recognise and reflect the legitimate occupational requirement that the workforce comprises only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

**Figure 1**

**The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner workforce provides viable career pathways and is becoming increasingly qualified, with many attaining higher-level primary health care and other health qualifications<sup>13</sup>.**



## What Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners do

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners undertake a wide variety of roles and deliver a broad range of clinical and primary health care services. They can work independently or as part of multidisciplinary health care teams making valuable contributions in positions spanning generalist primary health care, community health promotion and prevention, and in specialty fields including (but not limited to) maternal and child health, substance misuse, justice health, and social and emotional wellbeing.

The unique skills, capabilities and varied roles the workforce is able to perform provides considerable potential to utilise and expand the workforce into aged care, disability services, justice health and other specialty areas where there is significant service demand.

Depending upon the work setting and individual scope of practice Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners are able to:

- › provide clinical services such as the assessment and screening of physical health and social emotional wellbeing and providing care in line with care plans and/or treatment protocols
- › contribute to planning, delivering and evaluating presentation and promotion health programs
- › undertake community engagement and facilitate communication including interpreting and translating language
- › support education and training by providing support and advice on culturally-safe health services to other health professionals, policy makers, researchers and educators
- › carry out management activities including staff supervision and mentoring, business and financial management and quality improvement.

## A more collaborative and strategic approach is required

A lack of publicly available data makes it difficult to estimate the number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners or to develop a comprehensive understanding of workforce trends<sup>14</sup>. However, we do know from recent analysis of census data that this workforce is ageing and not growing commensurate with the increasing service demand or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population (with the most notable declines occurring in younger aged profiles and especially males)<sup>15</sup>.

With health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still falling short of the remainder of the Australian population and growing bodies of evidence also finding that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner workforce is integral to the delivery of culturally safe and responsive care, implementing measures to increase and facilitate the professional deployment of the workforce across the health care system will be key to meeting future population health needs, embedding cultural safety and facilitating health and wellbeing outcomes.

Investing in the professional deployment and expansion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner Workforce will clearly deliver all Australian Governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people significant benefits. A collaborative, coordinated and cohesive national cross portfolio approach to strengthening the capacity and capability of the workforce must be prioritised. In developing this approach, the following measures should be considered:

- › the endorsement of a nationally consistent definition to safeguard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ownership of the professions
- › the development of a nationally endorsed minimum scope of practice, underpinned by harmonisation of jurisdictional medicines authorities
- › the development of improved data sets to enable analysis of workforce trends, strategic planning and more targeted initiatives
- › investment in supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led pathway programs that foster achievement from VET in schools through to tertiary studies and
- › investment in more roles for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners across Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services, Government Health Services and Private Practice
- › harnessing opportunities for expanding the professions into aged care, disability services and justice health.

## References

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