



## Position Statement

### Health improvements through Makarrata

#### NATSIHWA's position

Empowering First Nations through a Makarrata with Australian governments is central to achieving health equity and well-being for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A Makarrata for truth-telling, conflict resolution and agreement making would provide a powerful basis for addressing the injustices of Australia's history that perpetuate the widening disparities in health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

#### Background

First Nations leaders have long called for a treaty process between Australian governments and First Nations. In 1979, a resolution from the Second National Aboriginal Conference (NAC) requested a "*Treaty of Commitment be executed between the Aboriginal nation and the Australian Government*" and identified Makarrata as the appropriate Aboriginal name for the proposed agreement.<sup>1</sup> The word 'makarrata' comes from the Yolngu people and means "*the coming together after a struggle*".<sup>2</sup> In 2017, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders held a constitutional convention issuing the *Uluru Statement From The Heart* calling for substantive constitutional change and structural reform including the establishment of a Makarrata Commission.<sup>3,4</sup>

*The Uluru Statement From the Heart* outlined the intent of the Makarrata Commission,

*Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination. We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.*<sup>5</sup>

Through a Makarrata, aspirations of First Nations for justice and self-determination can be pursued laying the foundations for achieving improved health and well-being for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through truth-telling and healing. Processes of Makarrata, would benefit health by structuring the way responsibility is shared as it would change the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australian society. The link between healing after colonisation and life expectancy can be understood by acknowledging the upstream factors that have a direct effect on the social and cultural determinants contributing to the health status of our people.

#### The importance of Makarrata

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), "*there is little evidence of widespread illness or disease in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population pre-colonisation, and it is unlikely that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people suffered from the lifestyle diseases that are endemic today*".<sup>6</sup> To understand the disparities of health outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since 1770 we must appreciate the impacts associated with: loss of spiritual and physical connection to the land and ability to derive from the land; intergenerational trauma and genocide; lost and stolen generations of families, social exclusion and disruptions to culture and language.<sup>7</sup> Diseases of despair have to be addressed to allow for the lifting of the spirits and processes of healing. Such processes commence with truth-telling, with acknowledgement of the causes of anger and despair, and continue through reconciliation and reparation.<sup>8</sup>

In his year 2000 Wentworth lecture, Patrick Dodson outlined such as process,

*From a cultural position, the only way that the mourning period can be ended is when the proper protocols and practical arrangements have been carried out. When the people who have had a wrong or an injustice done to them have been accommodated by the action of those responsible. Then we can come together*

*as friends and mates.*<sup>9</sup>

The Treaty Project (2003) stated that statistics “show Indigenous life expectancy is far better in New Zealand, Canada and the United States, all countries as it happens where governments entered into treaties with Indigenous people”.<sup>10</sup> While the way forward in terms of political options remains unresolved, we call for a Makarrata as an essential step towards conflict resolution and healing. Better health will be achieved through Makarrata that drives empowerment, self-determination, connections to culture and land, and thus control over destiny in ways that are meaningful to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## Indigenous lead health care

The Hon Ken Wyatt AM, MP said in his maiden speech to the Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives,

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the agencies of government need to jettison the old mindsets that embody Indigenous Australians as passive recipients of government programs and services, and to instead truly regard people as equals and allow them to be equal partners in developing their solutions.*<sup>11</sup>

NATSIHWA stands by the view that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and well-being priorities are best addressed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people taking a lead in identifying reform options and solutions. The root causes of the widening life expectancy gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians will only be addressed once Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are genuinely engaged by having a seat at the table as primary agents of change.<sup>12</sup>

## References

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