



Position Statement

The importance of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners in Australia's health system

NATSIHWA's position

The unmatched roles of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners (A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners) are pivotal to the delivery of culturally safe, responsive and effective health services across the Australian health care system. Greater valuing of and strategic investment in this uniquely positioned workforce is fundamental to achieving health equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the right to access culturally safe, high quality health care and services and, as maintained by Article 24 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, "...have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health". As the only Indigenous ethnic-based health workforce in Australia, A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners have a key role in the provision of culturally safe and comprehensive primary health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Their training foundations in comprehensive primary health care and their lived experience in the communities they serve inform their unique service perspectives and reach. A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners have inherent cultural intellect and possess social and linguistic knowledge and skills that underpin their relational capabilities that are fundamental to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health care service access. Their unparalleled roles as primary health care professionals must be recognised, valued and well-resourced to promote culturally safe health care and to reduce service access barriers impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout the health care system.

Background

A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people working to provide a range of clinical and non-clinical comprehensive primary health care services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. The findings of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker Project – Growing our Future (2011), the most comprehensive national review of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker workforce (now inclusive of Health Practitioners) to date, demonstrated the importance of the workforce. The report stated:

- *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker workforce is a major workforce delivering culturally safe, comprehensive primary health care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.*
- *Their holistic approach to health care is aligned to traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and philosophy.*
- *A growing body of evidence links the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker workforce to improved health outcomes in diabetes care, mental health care, maternal and infant care and palliative care.*
- *The workforce is becoming increasingly qualified, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers attaining higher-level primary health care and other health qualifications.²*

Research continues to find that cultural safety and strong relationships between primary health care services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are essential and that A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners facilitating these strategies form an important component of comprehensive primary health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.^{3,4,5,6}

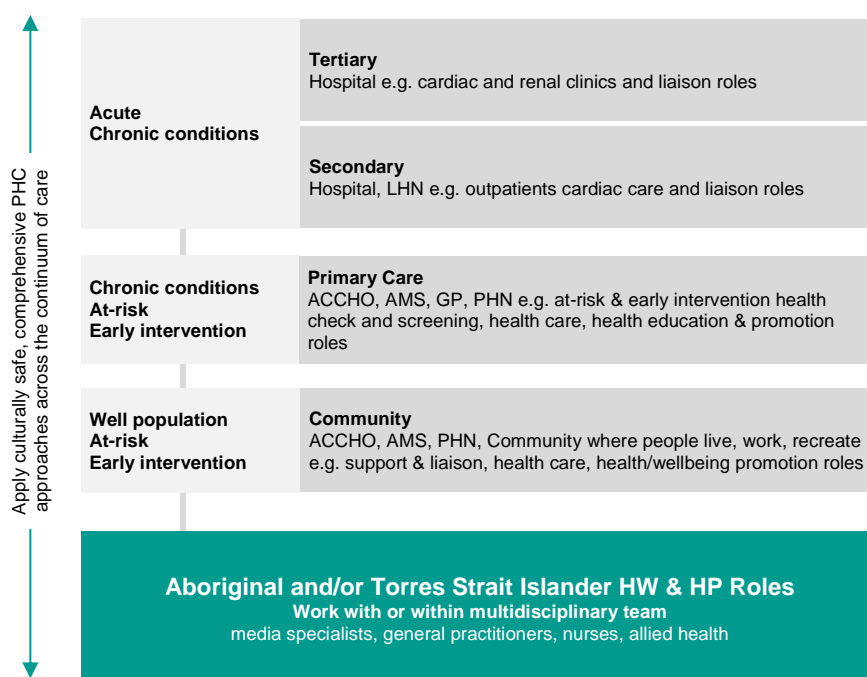
Furthermore, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2017 Report states research demonstrates that people prefer seeing health professionals from their own ethnic background and that this opportunity leads to improved health outcomes.⁷ The report stresses that a First Nations workforce is paramount to building health system capacity to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.⁸

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

As the only Indigenous ethnic-based health workforce in Australia, A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners are unique amongst other health professional groups. The workforce has a vital role providing comprehensive primary health care, including disease prevention, health and well-being promotion and primary clinical care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities. A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners work across all levels of health service delivery including in primary, secondary and tertiary health care settings. They work autonomously and in teams applying a holistic primary health care approach regardless of the health care setting. Due to their cultural intellect, their comprehensive primary health care training, their community reach and ability to develop strong and sustained relationships within communities, A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners have unique health care engagement capability. This capability, combined with their skills as health system navigators and cultural brokers means their roles are unmatched by any other roles within the health care system.

While their importance is well-established, there is not yet universal appreciation or valuing of A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners in Australia's health system and there has been varying success in integrating their roles into health services and within multi-disciplinary models of care. NATSIHWA continues to work to increase understanding of the roles, scope of practice and effective deployment of A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners as a vital, valued and characteristically unique primary health care profession within a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Worker & Health Practitioner Roles



Strategic workforce planning and investment

More work is required with NATSIHWA's partners and stakeholders to ensure that A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners are recognised, well-supported, effectively utilised and retained. This must include national scale workforce development reforms with appropriate regional and local service level implementation strategies. For example, national reform that addresses particular workplace challenges associated with community obligations and out-of-hours service demands and greater respect for the inherent cultural intellect, skills, knowledge and competence that A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners possess.

While the A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners workforce is growing, it is not keep pace with increasing service demand. Strategic workforce planning and investment is required to develop and grow these essential roles. Due to a lack of publically available data, it is difficult to estimate the number of A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners currently employed in the health system or to accurately estimate future workforce needs. However, there is analysis demonstrating that the pipeline of workers will not meet future service needs for an expanding population.

Identified as 'Indigenous Health Workers', a national analysis of trends between 2006-2016 showed an overall increase in total numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers, but a decline per capita.⁹

There has been overall growth in the number of Indigenous Health Workers (from 1,009 in 2006 to 1,347 in 2016), but this is not commensurate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population growth (221 Indigenous Health Workers per 100,000 people in 2006 to 207 Indigenous Health Workers per 100,000 people in 2016).¹⁰

Increasing the A&TSI Health Worker and Health Practitioner workforce will assist considerably in meeting population health needs and, at the same time, contribute to embedding cultural safety across community-controlled and mainstream health services.¹¹

Applying a culturally safe primary health care approach

A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners apply a culturally safe, comprehensive primary health care approach to the work they undertake across the continuum of care. Their skills include unique insights from their clinical and non-clinical primary health care practice, their lived experiences in the community and their cultural intellect supported by their knowledge of cultural beliefs, practices and protocols. This essential skill base has relevance at all levels of health care provision across the full health care service spectrum.

Areas for expansion

NATSIHWA believes that NATSIHWA believes that not only are the roles of A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners essential for better health outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific services, but essential for cultural safety in mainstream services, where consideration should be given to creating more positions. A&TSI Health Workers and Health Practitioners should also be considered for expanded roles in aged care, disability services, justice health and other specialty areas where there is significant service demand.

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