A Health System Coalition in support of Constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

The goal of this project is to contribute to the national conversation about constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, with a clear public statement of support from a health perspective by leading non-government health organisations.

Background

This project is an initiative of the Lowitja Institute, Australia's only national research institute wholly dedicated to Aboriginal health research. It has been endorsed by the National Health Leadership Forum (constituted under the auspices of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples) and the Close the Gap Coalition.

The Australian Constitution was written more than a century ago and is the main law that guides how the Commonwealth Government of Australia operates. The Constitution does not recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples of Australia nor does it acknowledge our country's continuing first cultures (the world's oldest). The Constitution allows race-based laws which could be used to discriminate (Section 51 (xxvi)) and says the States could still legally prevent people from voting based on race (Section 25)[1].

The story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia is a shared national story that needs to be acknowledged in the Constitution to improve understanding and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for better health outcomes. All Australians need to understand this national story to bring the country together. 'It is the next step in reconciling our past and it's the right thing to do.' [2]

Following the report of the Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition, [3] all major political parties declared their support for constitutional recognition, and the Prime Minister has announced that the government intends to work towards a referendum. For the referendum to pass, the people of Australia need to understand and support the case for change, and there needs to be strong leadership from across the political spectrum including from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders.

The health system, through its many respected non-government organisations, has the opportunity to make a contribution to the national debate, by speaking up for the value of recognition from a health perspective.

The challenge

For constitutional recognition (and the removal of racial discrimination provisions) to be gained, there are two key hurdles:

1. To obtain multi-party support for the proposals for change and the referendum questions that will deliver change; and
2. For the proposed changes to be passed at referendum by a majority of people and a majority of states.

Part of the work required for a successful referendum is to engage key community organisations, institutions and non-government organisations in the national dialogue, thereby energising their members and the broader public to engage and support the

referendum. There are many influential non-government organisations in the health system that enjoy respect and trust in the community. They provide a potentially broad base for public support for constitutional change on the basis of health benefit.

Aim and organisation

This project has begun to develop a coalition of non-government organisations, across the Australian health system, with each agreeing to sign a short statement in support of constitutional change. The statement and its signatories will be publicised through traditional and social media, and other community activities. The Lowitja Institute is providing an organising base for this work (through a contract with Flinders University). The project is collaborating with Recognise, the national community-based organisation supporting constitutional change, under the auspices of Reconciliation Australia.

Process

An initial group of 18 leading national health organisations have founded the coalition, and join us in inviting your organisation to participate. These organisations have joined on the basis of a shared commitment to constitutional change for better health, and better health care.

The role of members

Your organisation is asked to:

1. Consider and endorse the statement below, and notify us of agreement to be listed as a signatory.
2. Work with us as the project develops to assist with recruitment and other activities, at your discretion.
3. Be represented at the launch of the Coalition, tentatively planned for July 2014.

Our contact details

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[1] http://www.recognise.org.au/final-report
[2] http://www.recognise.org.au/why/why-recognition
[3] http://www.recognise.org.au/about/expert-panel

The Statement

The coalition statement below is short and simple with a focus on the health benefits of constitutional recognition. It does not address any other aspects of the referendum (e.g. wording of questions, preamble, etc). Your organisation's name will be added to this list should you decide to be a member.

We call on all Australians to support recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution.

We look forward to a time when all Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples can fully participate in all that Australia has to offer, enjoying respect for our country's first cultures and leadership, and the benefits of long healthy lives.

Australia's First Peoples continue to die far earlier and experience a higher burden of disease and disability than other Australians. This is a result of long term economic disadvantage and social exclusion, among other factors. Constitutional recognition would provide a strong foundation for working together towards better health and wellbeing within the hearts and minds of all Australians.

This statement has been endorsed by leading health organisations that are united in support of constitutional recognition:

Allied Health Professions Australia

Australasian College of Health Service Management

Australian College of Nurses

Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association

Australian Health Promotion Association

Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association

Cancer Council Australia

Catholic Health Australia

Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses

Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery (Australia & New Zealand)

Heart Foundation

Indigenous Allied Health Australia

Medical Deans of Australia and New Zealand

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers Association

National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)

Public Health Association of Australia

The Lowitja Institute