

Position Paper:

The Importance of Allied Health

Background

Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health professionals and students. IAHA acknowledges and respects the critical role that allied health professionals play in Australia's efforts to reform the health system and improve health outcomes for all Australians, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The wide-ranging disciplines representing allied health constitute a large and rapidly growing healthcare workforce in Australia. Allied health professionals comprise approximately 20% of the current Australian health workforce (in excess of 116,000 practitioners¹), with only nursing at 35% having a greater professional representation. As one of the largest and most effective professional health workforce cohorts, allied health professionals are well placed to ensure people receive treatment in the most appropriate place, avoid unnecessary hospitalisations and stay well for longer.

Allied health professionals are highly skilled and share in the delivery of health care services related to the identification, evaluation, management and prevention of disease and disorders; dietary and nutritional services; and rehabilitation services.

Allied health professionals work in widely diverse settings, including but not limited to clinics, hospitals, rehabilitation centres, laboratories, schools, long-term care facilities, Aboriginal Medical/Health Services, community health centres, and home healthcare agencies. The increase in number of people living with complex and chronic conditions across both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations and the wider community, has resulted in a greater need for a diverse range of allied health professionals working within primary and preventative health care settings.

Whilst the majority of allied health professionals are private practitioners, the shift from acute to

chronic models of care, means that a much greater level of cooperation and collaboration between the acute, subacute and primary healthcare settings will be required. Allied health professions will play an indispensable role in development of collaborative models of care.

A significant challenge for health care reform is to find cost-effective ways to ensure the efficient delivery of quality health care to significantly larger, culturally and geographically diverse patient populations. Interprofessional service delivery will be vital to address rising costs and improving Australian health outcomes.

Allied health professionals are an integral part of an interprofessional approach to cost-effective and high-quality health care delivery². Interdisciplinary care occurs when allied health professionals, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker/Practitioner, nurses and medical practitioners come together in dynamic collaborative teams to address complex healthcare needs.

It is well documented³ that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to suffer a greater burden of ill health than the rest of the population. Overall, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience lower levels of access to health services than the general population, are more likely than non-Indigenous people to experience disability and reduced quality of life due to ill health, to be hospitalised for most diseases and conditions and to die at younger ages than other Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also suffer a higher burden of emotional distress and mental illness than that experienced by the wider community.

The impact of these statistics on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities demands a coordinated interdisciplinary approach in order to improve health outcomes. Allied health professionals are an essential element in a responsive and equitable health system

that is able to accommodate the widely varying needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, many with chronic and complex conditions.

IAHA asserts that it will be the crucial role played by allied health professionals that will determine the future of the Australian health system and thus positively impact on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



Faye McMillan, IAHA Chairperson

Endorsed by the IAHA Board on 6 September 2012.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010 1370.0 - Measures of Australia's Progress, 2010 ABS, Canberra

[http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1370.0~2010~Chapter~Hours%20worked%20\(4.3.5.5\)](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1370.0~2010~Chapter~Hours%20worked%20(4.3.5.5)) (Accessed August 2012).

² Thomas, S, McLean, L, Debnam, A (2012) The Role of Allied Health in Health Care Reform NCMJ vol. 72, no. 5.

³ AIHW Indigenous Observatory <http://www.aihw.gov.au/hospitalisation-indigenous/> Accessed August 2012.