

IAHA calls for better targeted investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health workforce development

Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) understands, values and respects the critical role that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health workforce play in Australia's effort to transform health systems. Investment in the growth and empowerment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce is essential to promote the health, social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the broader Australian community. Allied health professionals are collectively the largest health workforce in primary care and the second largest clinical workforce in Australia but remain underutilised, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain underrepresented within the workforce.

As we head into the 2025 Federal Election, IAHA calls for government leaders to value the unique and essential work of IAHA and the critical role of the allied health workforce. IAHA calls for the commitment to five urgent priorities that, collectively, will play a pivotal role in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health outcomes and grow the appropriately skilled, culturally responsive allied health workforce. This is critical for an efficient and sustainable national health system by keeping people well for longer, to ensure that we can continue to meet the needs of all Australians into the future.

Priority 1: Meaningful and targeted investment in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan from all governments

The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021-2031* was developed under Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, and launched in 2022, with the support of all governments.

The Framework outlines activities that are key for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing, and broader progress on the socioeconomic targets under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (see priority three below). To date, however, progress under the Framework has been minimal. Successful implementation requires Commonwealth leadership, coordinated government funding, cross-sectoral partnerships, and co-designed and placed-based implementation of activities with leadership from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, in particular key partners such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce organisations.

IAHA calls for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan to be properly costed and resourced for effective implementation.

Priority 2: Equitable funding opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Organisations

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce organisations individually and collectively provide significant return on investment and national leadership within the sector. However, there has been a lack of equitable, coordinated, sustainable and long-term investment from successive governments, which constrains growth, impact and success.

This is representative of the failure of governments and departments to recognise and value the uniqueness of expertise required in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce development, the activities that IAHA undertake, and the outcomes and achievements made for over 15 years. If the Commonwealth is truly committed to better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, they need to invest appropriately in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce organisations and our ability to grow, develop and empower the workforce to deliver positive, transformational change.

IAHA calls for increased investment in the growth and development of the workforce, including longer term operational funding agreements with appropriate growth and indexation, and ongoing access to discrete project funds for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce organisations.

Priority 3: Governmental reform to enact National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reforms

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is fundamental to achieving the intent behind the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. All governments must commit to and uphold the priority reforms under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determined, led and governed priorities and to create a future where all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people thrive.

Supporting more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into the allied health workforce contributes to a wide range of social, cultural, health and wellbeing priorities and has direct and indirect contributions to each of the targets under the agreement. Workforce development – which is featured in all sector strengthening plans - is often approached in a fragmented manner but should be a shared priority and commitment which transcends governments and portfolio areas. It's time for all governments to honour the priority reforms, empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership to take precedence underpinned by our own self-determination, by proactively identifying and pursuing opportunities to work differently. Full implementation of the recommendations from the Productivity Commission's Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap – including to rethink mainstream government systems and culture – provides guidance for how this could be achieved in practice.

IAHA calls for governments, Ministers, and bureaucrats to reform ways of working to give life to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to progress the work.

Priority 4: Coordinated investment in culturally safe, place-based health education and training pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and employment and workforce models

Culturally safe, place-based health education and training programs are a mechanism to ensure enough Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' study and complete health qualifications to meet future needs, regionally and nationally.

The IAHA National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Academy is an example of innovation and excellence. The program provides Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainees an opportunity to develop their work readiness, knowledge and skills in a supportive and culturally responsive environment. Students obtain a nationally recognised qualification and are empowered to feel confident to pursue their pathway towards a career in health including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health context. The IAHA National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Academy has proven to be a successful model, currently operating across five regions. In addition to recognition through the National Training Awards as the Industry Collaboration of the Year, the programs achievements have exceeded all national benchmarks in student retention, completion and transition into employment. Individual stories further demonstrate the impact on individuals and families, however inequitable access to the program and ability for sustainable growth remain a significant concern, as does the absence of responsive pathways for other cohorts. Coordinated strategies to develop employment and workforce models – particularly in rural and remote Australia – is needed to support transition to employment and to keep people well, on Country, and to ensure a sustainable healthcare system.

IAHA calls for the government to increase access to successful workforce program through ongoing cross-portfolio and cross-jurisdictional investment, in the existing sites and for the expansion to new locations through innovation in models.

Priority 5: Implementation and monitoring of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People

IAHA affirms the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to access culturally safe and responsive systems, including health care, that is available, affordable, acceptable, and appropriate.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) sets out an approach, grounded in Indigenous self-determination and human rights. Yet, the implementation in Australia has lacked support and commitment from all levels of government. Health, education, and employment are all fundamental human rights and the UNDRIP is key for facilitating Indigenous health governance and as a mechanism for better outcomes, centred in culture and human rights.

IAHA calls for the UNDRIP to be respected and used to guide the implementation of the Priority Reforms under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

About IAHA

Established in 2009, Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) is a national, member-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health organisation. IAHA leads sector workforce development and support to improve health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

IAHA supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health students and graduates, value-adding to existing professional development educational and cultural support structures. IAHA also supports the broader allied health workforce and its associate membership of individuals and organisations with expertise, interest and commitment to improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Our membership is diverse and works across sectors including but not limited to health, mental health, disability, aged care, education, justice, community services, academia and policy.

Importantly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are at the centre of everything we do. IAHA looks forward to continuing to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations, as well as governments to improve the health and social and emotional wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Contact

Paul Gibson
Chief Operating Officer
(02) 6285 1010
paul@iaha.com.au