

# ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HEALTH WORKER 50-YEAR JOURNEY

- In 1971, the Aboriginal Health Programme (AHP) commenced and rapidly expanded during the remainder of the 1970s.
- The AHP was based on the World Health Organization (WHO) Standards and on the principles of preventive medicine; early detection of ill health and appropriate intervention; immunisation; and health education/promotion for easier reading.
- The primary objective of the AHP charter was to improve the health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Queensland, ensuring that it reaches the same level as the general populations health standards.
- AHP health teams comprise of a public health nurse(s), a field officer, and several Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health workers/assistants.
- In 1971, the inaugural Brisbane-based health team commenced and was located in the Health and Welfare building, George Street, Brisbane. The first three Queensland Health, health workers, two nurses and Dr Tony Musgrave formed a team. The team was posted to multiple communities as required.
- In 1972, teams expanded out, training was provided and teams moved to the corner of Adelaide and Wharf Street, Brisbane. Aboriginal health workers/assistants go through either a long training course or receive on the job training while doing their daily work.
- In the 1970's, communities experienced sporadic outbreaks of gastroenteritis, influenza, chest infections and common colds. There was a widespread incidence of gastrointestinal parasites resulting in a high incidence of malnutrition, anaemia and skin and ear disease. These became the main focus of the AHP teams. In the wake of outbreaks of infectious hepatitis there was an increased focus on environmental hygiene and preventive medicine programmes.
- In 1974, the Hearing Conservation and Treatment Programme was sponsored by the faculty of Medicine at the University of Queensland in conjunction with the State Department of Health and the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs (DAIA).
- The outstanding achievements of the AHP include a decrease in infant mortality, child malnutrition, and anaemia, as well as discoveries and treatment of various infectious diseases. The AHP influenced access of other health services including hospitals and their outpatient clinics, and general practitioners.
- From 1972 to 1977, data collected by the AHP showed significant trends in relation to frequency and cause of death of children and infants in different age groups.
- In 1974, the Queensland Health travelling health teams numbered 12 and were expected to double in numbers by December 1974. The hookworm and malaria control programmes along with immunisation and vaccination programmes are repeated regularly in communities.
- In 1977, the AHP maintained 19 travelling health teams for early detection of disease and remedial action; and in support of the Health Education Council maintained an educational programme around hygiene and health.
- In 1978, DAIA assisted Professor Fred Hollows in the administration of the National Trachoma and Eye Health programme in Queensland in liaison with the AHP teams in the relevant areas.
- In 1978, Dr Musgrave who had established the AHP was promoted to the position of Senior Health Officer within Queensland Health.
- Over the next decade Dr Musgrave advocated for continuation of the AHP through regular meetings and correspondence, presenting data and success of the AHP to heads of Commonwealth and State Government departments.
- In 1981, there were 29 health teams across the state, the total staff numbered 187.
- The AHP would identify and treat health conditions along with screening of all children under 15 years. The AHP health workers were trained in health promotion to convey messaging to individuals and families and encourage local community development.
- In 1983, there were 31 teams and seven subunits throughout the state including teams at 12 of the 14 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Nearly 66% of the AHP field staff were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.
- During 1986 – 1987, the AHP was heavily involved in providing Aboriginal people with knowledge about AIDS and advised and counselled the communities on how to prevent the virus from spreading.
- In 1986, the Hearing Conservation Unit had a task to train health workers and nursing staff in ear examinations and hearing loss, whilst maintaining screening programs.
- In 1987, there were 196 staff in the AHP, 72 health assistants and 29 health workers.
- In 1988, the AHP Director Dr R. B. Hawes retired, he was succeeded by Dr R. P. Davison, who had considerable previous experience in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.
- In 1989, priority areas for the health teams were nutrition, hearing impairment, sexually transmissible infections and HIV/AIDS, lifestyle diseases, hepatitis B immunisation, women's health and child health screening.
- In 1991, the AHP specialist units included the Statistics Unit; Parasitology; Training Unit; HIV/AIDS Prevention Unit; Diet and Nutrition Unit; Special Programs Unit; and Hearing Conservation Unit.
- In the early 1990's, formal TAFE health worker training commenced with Certificate 3, 4 & Diploma in Primary Health Care.
- From 2001 to 2011, health worker teams and units were at a peak with health worker education and training well supported.
- In 2011, the Hospital and Health Boards Act 2011 was introduced, Hospital and Health Services (HHS) were established, and each HHS established their own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health teams.

1971 – 1980

1981 – 1990

1991 – 2000

2001 – PRESENT

# POLICY ENABLERS

## 1961 – 1980

- In 1961, the One People of Australia League OPAL was established.
- In 1962, the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1962 received assent on 21 May 1962 and granted all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the option to enrol and vote in federal elections.
- In the 1967, Constitutional Referendum, Australians voted to change the Constitution so that like all other Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would be counted as part of the population and the Commonwealth would be able to make laws for them.
- 1967 – 1972 marked a period of 'Integration' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- In 1969, a National meeting of Federal and State Authorities reported the serious situation in relation to the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout the country and recommended special provision should be made for its improvement.
- In 1970, the Aboriginal flag was designed and created by artist Harold Thomas, a Luritja man from central Australia and a member of the Stolen Generations. The colours of the flag represent the Aboriginal people of Australia and their connection to the land. The flag was first raised on 9 July 1971.
- In 1971, the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Health Organisation was established in Redfern, Sydney Australia.
- In 1971, Senator Neville Bonner AO was the first Aboriginal Australian to enter Federal Parliament and continued to represent Queensland in the senate until 1983.
- In 1972, the Commonwealth Government proclaimed a policy of 'self-determination' for Aboriginal peoples, whereby they gained the right to make decisions about matters affecting their own lives, including the pace and nature of their future development within the legal, social and economic framework of Australian society.
- On 26 January 1972, the Tent Embassy was established on the lawns of parliament House, Canberra, to protest against the governments approach to Aboriginal land rights.
- On 4 December 1972, the Aborigines Act 1971 and the Torres Strait Islanders Act 1971 and regulations were proclaimed.
- In 1973, the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission also known as the Woodward Royal Commission was established, a foundational step in the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land rights in Australian law.
- In 1975, the Commonwealth Government passed the Racial Discrimination Act.
- In 1978, the World Health Organization (WHO) Alma Ata Declaration expressed the need for urgent action on global health inequality.

## 1981 – 1990

- On 26 November 1982, the Aboriginal and Islander Health Advisory Council commenced its operations in Brisbane to provide advice to the Health Minister on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health matters.
- In December 1987, Commonwealth State and Territory Ministers for Aboriginal Affairs and Health met and agreed to the establishment of the National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party.
- In 1989, the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS) was released and describes the Aboriginal Health Worker (AHW) role as "Health workers are generally members of the local community and often elected by the community to undertake the health worker training and have a special role in communicating health education and treatment options. In the primary health care facility, it is the health worker who is the first point of contact for service and as such the health worker bridges the 'cultural chasm' separating traditional and western world views".
- On 25 June 1990, Government approved the transfer of control for hospital and health facilities at Hopevale, Wujal Wujal, Weipa South, Lockhart River, Pormpuraaw, Kowanyama and the Torres Strait Island medical aid posts from the Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs to the Department of Health.

## 1991 – 2000

- In April 1991, as a result of recommendations of the NAHS Working Party, the Minister for Health, in consultation with community groups throughout Queensland, set up a State Tripartite Forum for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health to broker the relationship between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, Commonwealth and State Health Departments, through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC).
- In 1991, the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1991* makes unfair discrimination, sexual harassment, vilification and victimisation unlawful in Queensland.
- In 1991, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody presents its final report and recommendations to the Australian Parliament, including calling for a process of national reconciliation.
- In 1992, the High Court recognises native title in the landmark *Mabo v Queensland (No.2)* (1992).
- In 1992, the Torres Strait Islander flag was designed by the late Bernard Nomak from Thursday Island. The green stripe represents the land, the black stripes represent the people, and the blue the sea. The five-pointed star represents peace, navigational importance of stars, and the five distinct language and cultural groups of the region
- In 1993, the *Native Title Act* is passed.
- In 1994, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Policy, Queensland Health was released in response to the 1989 NAHS. It was the first Queensland policy and the only jurisdictional policy to articulate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community principles to guide policy implementation and set out the key directions and goals for 1995 to 2000.
- In 1995, the Statewide Identifier project was launched.
- In 1995, the Aboriginal Flag and Torres Strait Islander Flag were recognised by the Australian Government as official 'Flags of Australia' under the Flags Act 1953.
- In 1996, the Torres Strait & NPA District Health Council was established
- In 1996, the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Policy implementation plan was released, underpinned by the establishment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Coordinators in all of Queensland Health then Regional Health Authorities.
- In 1997, the Bringing Them Home Report was released, a Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families.
- In 1997/1998, the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker career structure was released.
- In 1999, *Our Jobs, Our Health, Our Future – Queensland Health Indigenous Workforce Management Strategy 1999 – 2002* was released.
- In 1999, the First Torres Strait Health Framework Agreement signed in February
- In 2000, a Queensland Health Statement of Intent for Reconciliation is signed, affirming Queensland Health's commitment to achieving Reconciliation.

## 2001 – 2010

- In 2007, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted.
- In 2007, the renewed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers Career Structure was released.
- In 2008, the Closing the Gap Statement of Intent was forged between the Governments of Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to work together to achieve equality in health status and life expectancy by 2030.
- On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a formal Apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly to the Stolen Generations whose lives had been blighted by past government policies of forced child removal and assimilation.
- In 2008, Queensland signs the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) – target to close the gap in life expectancy by 2031.
- In 2009, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker Career structure was revised.
- In 2009, the National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners (NAATSIHWP) was established to hold responsibility for professionalising, promoting and expanding the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner workforce.
- In 2009, the Queensland Premier, the Honorable, Anna Bligh signs the National Partnership Agreement (NPA) on Closing the Gap in Indigenous Health Outcomes.
- On 23 February 2010, the Queensland Parliament amended the state's Constitution to include a Preamble. The objective being to provide a preamble containing an aspirational statement of the 150th anniversary year of the establishment of Queensland, and to provide due recognition to Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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## 2011 – PRESENT

- In 2011, Hospital and Health Services were established in Queensland.
- In 2013, the Medicare Item 715, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples Health Assessment was introduced.
- In 2016, a refreshed Queensland Health Statement of Commitment to Reconciliation was released, strengthening Queensland Health's commitment to improving health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through provision of services, which are culturally respectful and responsive to their needs.
- In 2016, Queensland Health launches Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework 2016-2026
- In 2017, the Queensland Anti-Discrimination Commission in partnership with the Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (QAIHC) released in response to the Addressing Institutional Barriers to Health Equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland's Public Hospital and Health Services (Institutional Racism) report.
- In 2017, The Uluru Statement from The Heart is issued to the Australian people.
- In 2017, the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards included 6 Specific Cultural Actions.
- In 2018, Queensland Government releases its Reconciliation Action Plan 2018-21, demonstrating its commitment to building stronger relationships between Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and non-Indigenous Queenslanders.
- In 2019, the Human Rights Act 2019 is legislated in Queensland and includes rights to equality (including a persons race), privacy, cultural rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and access to health services.
- In August 2020, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce (Queensland Health) Certified Agreement (No.1) 2019 is established and certified by the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission.
- On 13 August 2020, the Health Legislation Amendment Act 2020 receives Royal assent. The Act contains amendments to the Hospital and Health Boards Act 2011 requiring each HHS to develop and implement a Health Equity Strategy and have First Nations representation on Hospital and Health Boards.
- On 30 April 2021, the Hospital and Health Boards (Health Equity Strategies) Amendment Regulation 2021 changed the Hospital and Health Boards Regulation 2012 to specify the minimum requirements each HHS must adhere to during the development and implementation of their Health Equity Strategy, including prescribed stakeholders, key priority areas and equity to achieve health equity.
- In November 2020, the amendments to the Hospital and Health Board Act passed.
- In July 2020, the refreshed National Agreement (NPA) on Closing the Gap sets out 16 socio-economic targets across four Priority Reforms.
- In 2021, The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031 (National Workforce Plan) was released. The target is for First Nations people to be fully represented in the health workforce by 2031.
- In 2022, for the first time, First Nations peoples of the Torres Strait region joined with First Nations peoples of mainland Australia to work together to achieve recognition of their native title rights. The determination, covering about 65,000 square kilometres of land and sea, recognised the Kemer Kemer, Meriam and Kulkalgal Nation and Kaurereg, Ankamuthi and Gudang Yadhaykenu peoples.
- In February 2023, the Queensland Premier introduced the Path to Treaty Bill into Queensland Parliament.
- In March 2023, the Prime Minister released the design principles of the Indigenous Voice to Parliament and confirmed that a referendum would occur in 2023.

