

# Australian South Sea Islander People

- Australian South Sea Islander people are the Australia-born descendants of the estimated 55,000 to 62,500 predominantly Melanesian people who were brought to Queensland and northern New South Wales between 1863 and 1904 to work as indentured labourers on sugar-cane and cotton farms<sup>4-6</sup>.
- Australian South Sea Islander people came from 80 Pacific Islands, but most were primarily from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands<sup>5</sup>.
- Australian South Sea Islander people are not indigenous to Australia and are distinct from Australians born in the Pacific Islands<sup>4</sup>. They are their own unique cultural group<sup>5</sup>.
- The community was recognised by the Commonwealth Government as a unique minority group in 1994 following a report undertaken by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission<sup>7</sup>.
- The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 1992 census estimated the Australian South Sea Islander population numbered between 10,000 and 12,000 people, with the majority (80 per cent) living in Queensland<sup>6</sup>. However, the 2001 Census reported only 3442 Australian South Sea Islander people based on ancestry<sup>6</sup>.
- **Language:** Australian South Sea Islander people predominantly speak English<sup>4</sup>.
- **Religion:** Most of the Australian South Sea Islander people who were brought to Queensland between 1863 and 1904 followed their own traditional religions, believing in the power of spirits, ancestors and one or more gods<sup>8</sup>. By the time recruitment to sugar-cane and cotton farms had ended in 1904, most Australian South Sea Islander people had converted to Christianity and many joined Australian churches or missions<sup>8</sup>. Today, Christianity is an integral part of what it means to be an Australian South Sea Islander person<sup>8</sup>.

Population of Australian South Sea Islander people<sup>1</sup> in Australia (2006 Census): 4098<sup>1</sup>

Population of Australian South Sea Islander people in Queensland: 3030<sup>2</sup>

Gender ratio (Queensland): 84.1 males per 100 females<sup>3</sup>

## Age distribution (Queensland)<sup>3</sup>:

Age	Per cent
0-19	38.8%
20-39	30.7%
40-59	22%
60+	8.4%

## Communication

- In addressing others, Australian South Sea Islander people use the person's title (Mr, Mrs) followed by their surname<sup>9</sup>. This is particularly important when addressing older people<sup>9</sup>. In some cases, health professionals may be invited to use the respectful title of *Auntie* or *Uncle*<sup>9</sup>.
- Nonverbal communication is important, particularly eye contact and small gestures. Australian South Sea Islander people may be shy with strangers, particularly in one-on-one interviews, and will generally wait until the other person speaks<sup>4</sup>.
- Some Australian South Sea Islander people may use body language to communicate with each other nonverbally before responding to a question about health care. They may also read the body language of the health care provider<sup>10</sup>.
- Physical contact between people of the opposite sex such as touching or patting the head is best avoided. If it is essential for a patient to be touched during an

examination, it is recommended that the health care provider first explain the need to the patient<sup>10</sup>.

- Some Australian South Sea Islander people may be too shy or reluctant to ask questions or correct any misconceptions. Some people may say yes or nod simply to please or to avoid embarrassment, even if they do not understand. It may be necessary to check the person's understanding by asking questions or asking them to repeat important points from discussions<sup>4</sup>.
- Australian South Sea Islander people may find it easier to understand and retain information if healthcare providers use diagrams or models, and provide written notes on treatment plans or medication schedules. Australian South Sea Islander people may also find illustrated pamphlets on relevant topics helpful<sup>4</sup>.
- Many Australian South Sea Islander people operate on event time as opposed to clock time<sup>10</sup>. Scheduling appointments at event time, such as *around lunch time at 12:30pm* instead of scheduling a time that may have no event association, may assist clients to be on time for appointments<sup>10</sup>.
- Many Australian South Sea Islander people prefer a health provider of the same gender<sup>10</sup>.

## Health in Australia

- There is little published research on the health of Australian South Sea Islander people.
- There is a high prevalence of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and obesity in Australian South Sea Islander people compared to the overall Australian population<sup>8,11,12</sup>. Diabetes rates have been shown to be three times higher than in the overall population<sup>4,8</sup>.
- There is a higher incidence of smoking, as well as asthma<sup>8,11</sup>.

## Health beliefs and practices

- Australian South Sea Islander people may not be familiar with scientific explanations of health and disease<sup>4</sup>. In particular, older clients may have little knowledge of reproductive anatomy and health<sup>4</sup>.
- During times of illness, Australian South Sea Islander people often have a *special person* (either a relative or a friend) to provide assistance and care<sup>4</sup>.
- Modesty is an important cultural value and Australian South Sea Islander people prefer not to be touched unnecessarily<sup>4</sup>. There may be a preference for being bathed or dressed by a relative or nominated *special person*<sup>4</sup>.
- It is considered taboo to discuss reproductive and excretory functions due to the personal nature of the topics. If these subjects need to be raised, it is recommended that the importance of talking about these subjects is first emphasised<sup>4</sup>.
- Australian South Sea Islander people who are seriously ill may have large numbers of visitors from their extended family<sup>4</sup>. Providing a separate room during visiting hours (if possible) may assist<sup>4</sup>. Alternatively, the nominated *special person* or a relative could be asked to assist with arranging a roster of visitors<sup>4</sup>.
- Spirituality is important to Australian South Sea Islander people. When a person is dying, their relatives may wish to hold a bedside prayer vigil<sup>4</sup>.

## Social determinants of health

- Australian South Sea Islander identity is based on a group culture, with group needs and decisions taking priority over those of an individual<sup>4</sup>.
- Australian South Sea Islander people are an economically disadvantaged community. The community was recognised as a distinct and severely disadvantaged ethnic group in 1994<sup>4</sup>.

- Poor education and employment opportunities have been the result of generations of poverty and discrimination<sup>8</sup>.
- Studies have indicated significant literacy issues for Australian South Sea Islander people<sup>8</sup>.
- Home ownership by Australian South Sea Islander people is lower than that of most other culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Australia<sup>8</sup>.

### **Utilisation of health services in Australia**

- Australian South Sea Islander people have low access to health services. Reasons include limited knowledge of the services to which they are entitled, lack of transport in rural areas, and being mistaken for Indigenous people

and consequently referred to services to which they are not entitled<sup>4</sup>.

- A study in Mackay reported communication and cultural barriers between Australian South Sea Islander people and local hospital services<sup>13</sup>. The availability of Australian South Sea Islander health staff was an important factor in encouraging people to access the hospital, which was feared and seen as a place of death and suffering. Some respondents also expressed feelings of abandonment by health services, as their right to use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services was lost in 1989, and they did not feel welcomed at mainstream services<sup>13</sup>.
- A tendency to be stoical when in pain has contributed to delayed presentation to health services<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> Population defined using Census Ancestry question.

It should be noted that there is great diversity within communities and people do not fit into a pre-determined cultural box or stereotype. The information presented here will not apply to all Australian South Sea Islander people and this profile should be considered in the context of the acculturation process.