



RACGP

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health

Introduction

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition Relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2018. The RACGP supports the recommendations of the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#) (the Uluru Statement) as a representation of the majority view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. As such, the RACGP supports appropriate constitutional and legislative change to implement the Uluru Statement's recommendations.

RACGP Submission

Position

The RACGP has long supported the campaign for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recognition in the Australian Constitution. Constitutional recognition is a valuable and important process, so long as it is done in a meaningful way that creates positive change for all Australians.

The Uluru Statement represents a significant and important step forward in the national discussion about constitutional recognition. In promoting not only recognition, but also an independent voice enshrined in the Constitution, and the Makarrata Commission to supervise agreement-making and truth telling, the Uluru Statement encourages a pathway to self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Adopting such an approach would also bring Australia into line with some of our overseas counterparts, such as New Zealand, Canada, the United States and Norway, who have established models for constitutional and treaty recognition.

The RACGP endorses the recommendations of the Uluru Statement. This support is consistent with the RACGP's commitment to close the gap in health inequality, our membership of the Close the Gap Steering Committee and reflects our ongoing support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership.

The RACGP believes that the Uluru Statement represents the consensus views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who participated at the First Nations National Constitutional Convention, but would also like to acknowledge the broad range of opinions held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, some of whom do not support this approach.

The recommendations of the Uluru Statement will require consideration of constitutional and legislative change. The RACGP is committed to undertaking advocacy amongst its membership in support of any proposed changes.



Rationale

Leading to improved health and wellbeing

As the debate over constitutional recognition has progressed in recent years, a significant body of research has developed establishing links between constitutional recognition and improved health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.¹ In recognition of these linkages, the RACGP joined the Lowitja Institute's Health System Coalition for Constitutional Recognition, which considered constitutional recognition from a health perspective.

It is widely known that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience poorer health outcomes when compared with non-Indigenous Australians. This is in large part due to persistent inequalities in the social determinants of health, in addition to barriers to the same level of access in health, employment and education.² The structural reforms outlined in the Uluru Statement provide a clearer framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to influence the social and economic determinants of their health and wellbeing. These outcomes can be achieved:

- through enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have a greater say in the development of policies and legislation which directly affect their health and
- symbolically, through the recognition of their identity and culture, which is important for strengthening social and emotional wellbeing.³

A recent study⁴ suggests that constitutional recognition can also bring about opportunities to improve governance and leadership in the health sector. Evidence from overseas indicates that the presence of constitutional recognition makes recognition in health legislation easier. The options put forward in the Uluru Statement provide further basis to clarify governance arrangements for health, including an active role for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the decision-making process.

There are strong benefits that come from enabling greater control over one's life circumstances.⁵ Historically, governments' engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been inconsistent and often disrespectful.⁶ A stronger framework, which enables direct commentary on legislation and policy will encourage all governments to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as equal partners, fostering closer and reciprocal working relationships.

The strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are not always recognised, including significant contributions across a range of sectors, including the arts, environment and sport. At the centre of the Uluru statement is a recognition of the role culture and heritage play in developing a stronger Australian nation. Empowered and locally driven leadership is already in practice in the health sector through Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations. They are a powerful example of how Aboriginal-led services and decision making can provide important cultural and practical benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The implementation of the Uluru Statement is an opportunity to strengthen these influences.

Support for the majority resolution

The Uluru Statement represents one of the strongest unified positions on the issue of constitutional recognition, as led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations.



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The consultation process has been wide-reaching and inclusive of a group of people with enormous diversity and experience. To the extent that it is possible through such a complex process, the group achieved consensus.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and organisations have consistently communicated their expectations and priorities to Government based on first-hand experience and knowledge of issues affecting their people. It is the responsibility of governments and the Australian community to listen and honour the expertise and experience that has informed the development of the Uluru Statement.

The RACGP highlights the strong public support for the Uluru Statement, including from some of our key stakeholders, the Close the Gap Coalition and the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, as well as other prominent organisations such as National Congress and the Australian Medical Association.

More broadly, there is growing public support for the implementation of the Uluru Statement⁷ and commitments from a broad range of organisations and from within the current Parliament. This groundswell of hard-won support is positive and highlights the need for further public consultation and familiarisation with the intent and expected benefits of the recommendations of the Uluru Statement.

Conclusion

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have articulated their preferred model for constitutional recognition. The Uluru Statement outlines key reform objectives which have achieved collective agreement amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The RACGP supports advancing progress towards developing this model so that it can be put to the broader community for further public consultation. Promoting new concepts and ideas that are not wholly embraced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are unlikely to be supported by the broader public.

The pathway forward will continue to be challenging. Achieving progress will require a strong level of leadership, bi-partisan support and commitment to change. Constitutional recognition must be embraced as a national priority for this to occur.

The RACGP strongly encourages this Committee to provide a concrete pathway and timeline for the current Parliament's agreement to ensure further progress on constitutional recognition. For the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and for the continued growth and prosperity of Australia as a nation.

About the RACGP

The RACGP is Australia's largest professional general practice organisation, representing more than 38,000 members working in or towards a career in general practice in urban, rural and remotes areas.

The RACGP is responsible for:

- defining the nature and scope of the discipline
- setting the standards, curriculum and training
- maintaining the standards for high quality clinical practice



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- supporting general practitioners (GPs) in their pursuit of excellence in patient care and community services.

About RACGP Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health

Improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is one of Australia's highest health priorities. The RACGP is committed to raising awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health needs and as a result, RACGP Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health ('the Faculty') was formed to help 'close the gap'.

The Faculty has over 8,000 members either working in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healthcare sector or who have a passion and interest in this area. The Faculty undertakes a range of activities to help improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health outcomes. These include:

- developing guidelines and resources for GPs and health professionals
- delivering education and training
- advocating on issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health
- celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, and achievements by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander GPs, registrars and medical students.

References

¹ See for example: R. Mokak. 2015. The link between health and wellbeing and constitutional recognition. *Med J Aust*; 203 (1): 1; C. Lawrence. 2013. Aboriginal health and the Australian Constitution: how do we fix them both? *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*. doi: 10.1111/1753-6405.12026

² Commonwealth of Australia. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. *Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2018*.

³ Lowitja Institute. 2015. Why Constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples matters for health. Accessed from: <https://www.lowitja.org.au/recognisehealth/why>

⁴ Howse, G. 2011, *Legally Invisible—How Australian Laws Impede Stewardship and Governance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

⁵ Thorpe, A., Arabena, K., Sullivan, P., Silburn, K. & Rowley, K. 2016. *Engaging First Peoples: A Review of Government Engagement Methods for Developing Health Policy*. The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

⁶ Pat Anderson. 2017. 'Our survival depends upon it': why we need constitutional change. Accessed from: <https://sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2017/10/27/our-survival-depends-upon-it--why-we-need-constitutional-change.html>

⁷ See for example: A J Brown, P Kildea & J Parkinson. Australian Constitutional Values Survey 2017. Accessed from: <https://app.secure.griffith.edu.au/news/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Griffith-University-UNSW-Australian-Constitutional-Values-Survey-Sept-2017-Results-2.pdf>; M McNerney. 2018. Shorten commits Labor to Uluru Statement pathway to Close the Gap. *Croakey*. 12 February 2018.