



Position Paper: Uniqueness of our Workforce

The Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (CATSINaM) was founded in 1997. It is the national peak body that represents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses and midwives across at a national level. We are a membership-based organisation and are governed by a nationally elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Board.

Participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the nursing and midwifery workforce is an essential element in closing the life expectancy gap of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within a generation¹. We hold a unique combination of clinical and cultural knowledge and are committed to providing national leadership on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health policy development and implementation. We are a fundamental element of a health systems capacity to deliver services in a culturally safe manner and contribute to the delivery of improved health outcomes for all.

We are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples before we are nurses or midwives. This means we are on a lifelong journey together to fulfill our cultural obligations and commitments to our communities, families and ourselves.

Culture is central to our health and wellbeing and we accept a definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health as a holistic concept:

‘...not just the physical wellbeing of the individual, but the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being, thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their community. This is a whole-of-life view and it also includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life.’²

As an extension of this definition, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nursing and midwifery is a unique professional knowledge system at the core of which lies our culture.³ We bring with us a unique knowledge system that connects us physically, spiritually and socially to the land and

¹ CATSINaM. 2014 ‘Recruitment and Retention Position Statement’
<http://catsinam.org.au/static/uploads/files/recruitment-and-retention-endorsed-march-2014-wfptinaomexg.pdf>

² National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party, A National Aboriginal Health Strategy, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1989.

³ West, R. 2014 Oration ‘Rising to the Challenge of our time: better health and wellbeing for our First Nation’s People’
https://www.acn.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/Oration_Booklet_2014_C7_Rising%20to%20the%20challenge%20of%20our%20time.pdf

Value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives Safety Position Statement

each other. Culture is central to our practice – guiding us in the delivery of holistic and culturally safe models of care for our people and communities. We work on a strengths based approach, understanding our communities’ social and cultural strengths and utilising these in caring for our people.⁴

If we are to achieve positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patient’s, health professionals must practice in both clinically and culturally safe ways. Our unique skills and attributes position us to lead the change needed to achieve a culturally safe health system for all.⁵ Throughout Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples extensive history in nursing and midwifery we have highlighted systematic inequalities and fought for change.⁶ We continue to counter the dominance of the non-Indigenous perspective with a stronger holistic human rights based approach to health.

Our unique knowledge must be valued within the systems responsible for educating and training nurses if we are to move towards cultural safety within our profession. More must be done to ensure that our ways of learning, teaching and knowing - including our languages - are reflected in national curricula, teaching methodologies and training standards.

CATSINaM wants to see change in the culture, practice and makeup of the nursing and midwifery workforce that is in line with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan Vision of an ‘Australian health system free of racism and inequality where all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to health services that are effective, high quality, appropriate and affordable’. More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses and midwives are needed to lead this change if we are to overcome the health disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and other Australians, and achieve the goals of the National Health Plan.⁷

Increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses and midwives helps to address the broader social determinants of health. We are role models of the positive effect of education, training and employment and contribute to the economic development of our communities. Investing in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce creates a range of cross-sector regional and national benefits, including improved education, training and employment outcomes.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Alford, K. 2015 ‘A cost effective approach to closing the gap in health, education and employment: investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nursing education, training and employment’. CATSINaM

⁶ Best, O. 2011 ‘Yatdjuligin: The Stories of Queensland Aboriginal Registered Nurses 1950-2005’ Phd Dissertation, University of Queensland

⁷ Australian Government (2013) National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023

Our Principles

- We are First Nations People and maintain our cultural heritage.
- Social justice and human rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a requirement of reconciliation.
- We are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People before we are nurses and midwives.
- We recognise that we are on a lifelong journey with cultural obligations and commitments to our communities.
- We challenge the dominant western health model in which nurses and midwives live and work.
- The position that promotes all people as being equal and treating them the same, denies difference.
- We have significant expertise in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and believe our experience, knowledge and worldviews challenges the established models of health.
- Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses and midwives are forced to live a 'double life' between two worlds and cultures causing internal conflict.

Recommendations

1. The Commonwealth Government lead the development of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nursing and Midwifery Workforce Strategy in collaboration with CATSINaM to address workforce shortfalls, training and employment issues. This is in line with Recommendation 1, A cost effective approach to Closing the Gap in health, education and employment: Investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nursing, [and midwifery] education, training and employment.
2. The Commonwealth Government, in partnership with the National Health Leadership Forum (NHLF), lead the establishment of a national benchmark for quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety training for the health workforce and other relevant sectors.