



KEY THINKERS FORUM

Topic

THE 1967 REFERENDUM, IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH: THEN, NOW AND IN THE FUTURE.

On 30 May 2017, the Poche Indigenous Health Network hosted its 8th bi-annual Key Thinkers Forum. Some of Australia's leading advocates for Aboriginal health and Indigenous social justice were invited to share their reflections on the 1967 Referendum, 50 years on.

Panel members included:

- Sol Bellear AM, Aboriginal Medical Service Redfern Chair, Lifetime Activist
- Norma Ingram, Wyanga Aboriginal Aged Care Chair, Lifetime Activist
- Boe Rambaldini, Manager, NSW Health Centre for Oral Health Strategy
- Gary Oliver, CEO National Congress of Australia's First People
- Chontel Gibson, Faculty of Health Science, University of Sydney

Over 100 health professionals, community members, academics, students and policy makers joined the discussion, which was facilitated by Professor Tom Calma AO, Patron and Chair of the Poche Network.

The forum was accessible online as a LIME Network SLICE OF LIME Seminar. The audio-recording is available [here](#). The Briefing Paper, distributed prior to the forum, is available on the Poche Indigenous Health Network website.

This 'Poche Opinion' explores some of the key thematic issues raised during the forum.

1967 – 2017: 50 Years of Learning

2017 is an opportune time to reflect on Aboriginal experience in Australia. From a constitutional point of view, a race of people who have occupied this continent for around 60,000 years have just turned 50. It has been **50 years since the 1967 Referendum**, which saw Aboriginal people finally counted in their own country. It has been **25 years since the Mabo decision**, which legally recognised native title and rendered terra nullius a legal fiction. And it has been **20 years since the *Bringing them home* report** made its recommendations, (though it is worth noting that the majority have not been implemented).

It has been 50 years, therefore, since Australia began moving towards enlightened policy. To look back from where we are now, as a nation on the journey towards Indigenous social justice and equity, is to look back on a road paved with valuable lessons. There are lessons born out of success, and lessons born out of failures. In the Indigenous health domain, there is deep understanding today of what constitutes and determines health and wellbeing within Aboriginal communities, and there is ample evidence on what impedes it.

Three days prior to the Key Thinkers Forum taking place, over 250 delegates gathered at the 2017 First Nations National Constitutional Convention in Uluru. They made a historic Statement from the heart in hopes of improving the lives of future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples¹. The sentiments of that statement clearly reflect the views of the Key Thinkers Forum members, including the Poche Indigenous Health Network.

First Nations people - and their allies - are determined to bring about real, structural change that will genuinely empower Aboriginal people to take control of their own lives. That is where we are today.

It is time for our nation's leaders to catch up.

What impact did the 1967 Referendum have?

In order to look forward, and to decide how best to approach the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we need to look back. What happened the last time the Australian Constitution was changed in the spirit of benefitting Aboriginal people? Some of the panel members at the Key Thinkers Forum were able to speak from their own personal experience of the referendum.

Norma Ingram began her address in her own language, reminding the forum that when she was a child, living on an Aboriginal Reserve, speaking her own language would have been against the law; this was the type of cultural practice that would result in children being taken away. Prior to 1967, state governments had total control: over where an Aboriginal person could go, what work they could do, what they could wear, and how they could speak. We need to ask ourselves: What did that control do to Aboriginal people? What did it do for Aboriginal culture? "If you behaved yourself - were a good Aborigine," Norma said, "then you could be exempted from being an Aborigine." The implications of this are so great on sense of self and self-worth.

Sol Bellear AM spoke of the segregation and racial discrimination that persisted after the referendum. He recalled Aboriginal people moving into the intellectual melting pot of Redfern, "like political refugees." He also recalled the birth of the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service in 1970 and the Redfern Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS), that was established soon after, in 1971. Having witnessed the harsh and inequitable treatment Aboriginal people were receiving at the hands of police and other members of Sydney society, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians came together to try put some control back into Aboriginal hands. The Aboriginal Legal Service is still in operation and the Redfern AMS is one of 176 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services operating around Australia.

Gary Oliver recalled being known by his family as a "free baby", because he was born after the referendum. So, the 1967 referendum clearly gave hope. It represented a seismic shift in Australian thought, and it paved the way for legislation to be made that would improve the rights of Aboriginal people; but it did not free Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from racism, it did not wholly empower Aboriginal people, and it did little to encourage respect for Aboriginal culture. Consider for a moment the audacity of the 1967 referendum – the need for White Australians to be asked to allow Aboriginal people to be counted as Australians.

So what needs to change? What will it take to move forward, to sort it out?

"What will it take?" is probably the most commonly raised question among those debating the best way forward for "fixing" these issues. Ask any Aboriginal activist or advocate - ask any of the panelists at the Key Thinkers Forum - and they will tell you the answers have been with us all along: **It is time we became Key Listeners.** Here is what is being said:

"Australia needs to hear the truth"

Like other nations on the pathway to reconciliation and equity (Canada for example), Australia needs to hear the truth. It is acknowledged that truth telling will not be easy: it will involve touching on trauma; it will involve admissions of fault and failure; it will be uncomfortable, but truth is vital to mutual understanding, respect, freedom and justice.

Some preliminary questions to confront around health: How did Aboriginal people live before colonization? What did terra nullius do to Aboriginal people? How did colonial government policies and subsequent government policies impact Aboriginal health and the capacity for Indigenous Australians to lead healthy lives? What impact did those policies have on Aboriginal culture and respect for that culture?

There are plenty more questions to be answered about the social determinants of health – about social exclusion, education, housing, employment, addiction – and about the cultural determinants of health from an Aboriginal perspective. We must consider the short amount of time Aboriginal people have had the access to mainstream education when compared to non-Aboriginal Australians. For example, despite tertiary education scholarships being granted in 1969 to Aboriginal students, the first federal education policy aimed at tackling Aboriginal educational disadvantage only appeared in 1982.

The legacy of Australia's past is that today we have intergenerational trauma and disadvantage that has not been adequately dealt with. Stolen land, stolen children, cultural suppression, racial discrimination; Aboriginal people are living with the daily effects of trauma and with the daily challenges of an uneven playing field. Continuing to gloss over our nation's history will never take us forward. **It is time all Australians became acquainted with the truth, and walked forward together.**

“Aboriginal people have answers and know what the priorities are, but we still don’t have a voice”

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have always held the key to their own health and prosperity. This culture is after all, the world’s longest surviving culture. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are counted, represented, and consulted, Aboriginal voices are still not being heard. It could, in fact, be argued that Aboriginal Australians have never been properly heard. Australia stands alone as the only Commonwealth nation that does not have a treaty with its Indigenous peoples.

Australia has failed to make significant inroads into the health status of Aboriginal people.

Governments have made attempts to close the gap in health outcomes for Aboriginal people. They have provided focus through the Closing the Gap strategy, leadership through the Council of Australian Governments’ agenda, and funding through state and federal governments including the consolidation of federal funding for Aboriginal affairs through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy. The recent Prime Minister’s Report on Closing the Gap (2017), however, provides a sobering update on how big the task ahead is. Indeed the only target on track to be achieved by 2030 is high school completion rates for Aboriginal young people. While trending might be in a positive direction infant mortality is not on track to be achieved and neither is the gap in life expectancy .

In 2005 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner from the Australian Human Rights Commission released a Social Justice Report detailing the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people across health, well-being, education and employment³. The Social Justice Report proposed that governments across Australia under the auspices of the Council of Australian Governments commit to closing the disadvantage gap for Aboriginal people within 25 years.

In 2006 health organisations, peak bodies and rights organisations across Australia joined together to establish the Close the Gap Campaign. This campaign was to lobby for action on closing the gap in inequality for Aboriginal people within a generation⁴. In 2008, the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, signed a Statement of Intent committing the Australian government to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other governments to close the gap in disadvantage for Aboriginal people by 2030 in accordance with the recommendations in the 2005 Social Justice Report⁵. Also, in 2008 the Council of Australian Governments committed to these goals and set targets to be tracked and reported on annually by the Prime Minister. This strategy is known as Closing the Gap⁶.

In 2014, the Australian Government combined all funding for all federally funded Aboriginal programs into five areas:

- Jobs, Land and Economy
- Children and Schooling
- Safety and Wellbeing
- Culture and Capability
- Remote Australia Strategies.

Funding of \$4.9 billion was allocated over four years to support the strategy . The vast majority of this funding was already allocated to organisations and programs. An expression of interest process was undertaken and significant amounts of funding was reallocated to new programs and organisations . The impact of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy is unclear at this stage. However, the 2017 Prime Minister’s Annual Report on Closing the Gap reported that none of the targets are on track to be achieved by 2030 other than Year 12 completion rates .

The National Trachoma and Eye Health program, started by Fred Hollows, is one example where significant ground was being made in the 1970s and 80s to eradicate Trachoma, then management changed and within months the funds moved the funds to other areas. The disease is still a burden in remote Aboriginal communities, and again Australia stands out among its peers for all the wrong reasons. Australia is now the only high-income country with trachoma. These kinds of occurrences and statistics demonstrate the frustrations of systemic bias – of failing to value the voices of informed Aboriginal people who know where the priorities are.

It is time for radical change. 50 years of tokenism and tinkering has not restored Aboriginal people to health, nor has it generated the kind of respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture deserves. And yet, deeply troubling as this is, those working to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are resilient. They are feeling strong and determined as these words from the Uluru Statement demonstrate:

“We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.”

“We are done waiting on government, but we know we can’t do it alone.”

The evidence from successful programs run in Australia, and from those in countries like North America and New Zealand, is that **success comes from self-determination** – and that a great deal can be achieved over relatively short periods of time. **Community-led programs run in genuine partnership** have proven far more effective and sustainable than government-led initiatives.

So what can non-Indigenous Australians, as allies, do to help progress the rights of Indigenous people?

There are many ways to help:

- Stop speaking for and thinking for Aboriginal people and start listening and supporting.
- Make room for Indigenous concepts of health and leadership.
- Join Aboriginal organisations and show genuine support.
- Educate themselves on Indigenous issues and help educate the younger generation.
- Start conversations and start journeys within personal social circles and family groups.
- Champion Aboriginal culture as a strength and a gift that we can all be proud to share in.
- Be mindful when speaking about Aboriginal culture – stop perpetuating negative stereotypes.
- Amplify the voices of role models and successful community ventures via our own social media networks, and reward mainstream media reports that promote cultural strength through sharing.

Concluding reflections/projections

During our Key Thinkers Forum, we took a moment to imagine a future Australia without racism – systemic racism as well as individual racism. We imagined Respect, Responsibility and Reciprocity – not only Recognition.

We imagined our First Peoples having a voice enshrined in law, brought about by truth and treaty making. We imagined all Australians would play a part. We imagined we would have educated young Australians (Indigenous and non-Indigenous). We imagined genuine partnerships at work right across the country. We imagined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would no longer be powerless.

We know the problems surrounding Aboriginal health can be overcome if we all work together. We have witnessed real change firsthand. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have vital contributions to make. It is time the rest of the nation listened.

¹ For the purposes of this paper we will refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Aboriginal people

² Australian Government. Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s Report 2017. Canberra: Australian Government, 2017. [Available from: <http://closingthegap.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/ctg-report-2017.pdf>]

³ Calma T. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Report. Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission, 2005. [Available from: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/social-justice-report-6>]

⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). Close the Gap: Indigenous Health Campaign Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission; 2016 [Available from: <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/projects/close-gap-indigenous-health>]

⁵ ibid

⁶ Australian Government. Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage: the Challenge for Australia. Canberra: Australian Government, 2009. [Available from: https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/closing_the_gap.pdf]

⁷ Australian Government. Indigenous Advancement Strategy. Canberra 2014 [Available from: <http://www.indigenous.gov.au/indigenous-advancement-strategy>]

⁸ Parliament of Australia. Commonwealth Indigenous Advancement Strategy tendering processes. 2016. [Available from: http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance_and_Public_Administration/Commonwealth_Indigenous]

⁹ Australian Government. Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s Report 2017. Canberra: Australian Government, 2017. [Available from: <http://closingthegap.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/ctg-report-2017.pdf>]