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Cultural safety crucial in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healthcare

Joint statement from the Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association, Public Health Association of Australia, Consumers Health Forum of Australia and National Rural Health Alliance

If we want Australia's First Peoples to have the best possible healthcare, then all healthcare providers and professions have to seriously embrace the concept of cultural safety.

In saying this we strongly support the joint statement on cultural safety in healthcare recently released by the nation's five leading national nursing and midwifery bodies.

Cultural safety in this context involves health professionals examining their own beliefs, behaviours and practices, as well as issues such as institutional racism, in ensuring that their services are perceived as safe—by the patient rather than the provider.

'For much too long Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have found health services unwelcoming, and even traumatic to the point where they will discharge themselves from hospital against medical advice', AHHA's Strategic Program Director, Dr Chris Bourke said.

'We know that this occurs, even in serious coronary care cases, through the AHHA-Heart Foundation Lighthouse Hospital Project aimed at improving cardiac care in hospitals for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients. Consequently we have taken as many steps as we can to embed cultural safety within the program as a top priority.'

PHAA CEO Michael Moore said the PHAA advocated cultural safety and the building of trust being integral to all public health programs, including preventative activities: 'Very simply, if they are not, then the messages would not be seen as credible and would therefore be largely ignored'.

Consumers Health Forum CEO Leanne Wells said safe and respectful practice must be the centrepiece of healthcare: 'Evidence and experience tell us that healthcare works best where the patient and the clinician can share their knowledge and understanding', Ms Wells said.

Mark Diamond, CEO of the National Rural Health Alliance, said culturally safe care was especially important in regional and rural areas, where there was a larger proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than in the cities.

'We fully support rural health services communicating and liaising with their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop care that, by being perceived as safe by the client, will maximise positive health benefits and outcomes', Mr Diamond said.

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