



Response to the Home Care Packages Program Guidelines: Consultation Draft

The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) was established in 1996. VACCHO is the peak Aboriginal health body representing all of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) in Victoria. The role of VACCHO is to build the capacity of its membership and to advocate for issues on their behalf. Capacity is built amongst members through strengthening support networks, increasing workforce development opportunities and through leadership on particular health areas. Advocacy is carried out with a range of private, community and government agencies, at state and national levels, on all issues related to Aboriginal health.

Nationally, VACCHO represents the Community Controlled Health sector through its affiliation and membership on the board of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO). State and Federal Governments formally recognise VACCHO as the peak representative organisation on Aboriginal health in Victoria. VACCHO's vision is that Aboriginal people will have a high quality of health and wellbeing, enabling individuals and communities to reach their full potential in life. This will be achieved through the philosophy of community control.

The objectives of the Home Care Packages Program focus on flexible provision of aged care support, stipulating that individuals' care goals "will be shaped by the consumer's own circumstances including...cultural and personal values"ⁱ. Much of the information provided by the consultation draft guidelines (the draft guidelines) is consistent with this stated objective. However the draft guidelines place constraints upon the provision of aged care which supports the social and cultural needs of Aboriginal people, particularly those living in urban and regional areas.

In order to meet the support needs of Aboriginal clients, program guidelines must encourage and enable providers to:

- provide culturally safe services: that is, services which affirm the individual's identity, acknowledge and celebrate culture and "enable them to feel safe to be themselves"ⁱⁱ -
- support social inclusion and maintenance of social connection within the context of clients' Aboriginality.

This paper will highlight a number of cultural considerations which are not adequately addressed by the draft guidelines in their current form. Where possible, this paper will provide examples of the ways in which these cultural considerations have been previously accommodated in the delivery of Community Aged Care Packages (CACPs) and Extended Aged Care at Home (EACH) packages, to enable shortcomings of the current guidelines to be addressed.

Cultural considerations particularly relevant to the provision of aged care to Aboriginal people include:

- **Individuals' need for culturally safe services**

The guidelines note that individuals' care goals will be shaped by their cultural values, but do not acknowledge the role of cultural competence in enabling approved service providers to meet care recipients' goals or endorse strategies which could assist approved service providers in providing culturally safe services. For example, Aboriginal care recipients often express a preference to have care provided to them by other members of the Aboriginal communities of which they are members. For small, dispersed Aboriginal communities such as those in Victoria,



any Aboriginal person in the community may well be a friend or family member of the intended care recipient. The consultation draft guidelines currently state:

“Contracting service provision to informal carers, family members or friends is generally not supported or encouraged under the Home Care Packages Program.

However, it is recognised that in some areas, for example, remote parts of Australia, this may already occur and may continue to do so where there is no other workable alternativeⁱⁱⁱ”.

At present, 74%^{iv} of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not live in *Remote* and *Very remote* areas. Aboriginal people receiving Home Care Packages in metropolitan and regional areas should have the option to contract their family or friends as care providers. This should be explicitly stated in the guidelines, aligned to requirements for approved providers to develop and implement procedures to address the occupational health and safety of contracted workers and provide safeguards against elder abuse.

In addition, the list of support services for Home Care Levels 1 and 2 (p 42) should include “Cultural support” defined in terms of connecting care recipients with culturally significant community events (e.g. social events planned for NAIDOC week¹), and within Care Levels 3 and 4 *Support Services*, the description of *Leisure, interests and activities* (p46), should include culture; i.e.:

“encouragement to take part in social and community activities that promote and protect the consumer’s lifestyle, interests, **culture** and wellbeing”

- **Individuals’ obligation to immediate family, extended family and broader community**

The Aboriginal definition of health emphasises the centrality of social relationships:

“For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, health does not just entail the freedom of the individual from sickness but requires support for healthy and interdependent relationships between families, communities, land, sea and spirit. The focus must be on spiritual, cultural, emotional and social well-being as well as physical health”^v

The strength and importance of family relationships to individual wellbeing manifest in a number of ways. The following examples which are particularly pertinent to delivery of aged care:

- **Family obligations related to Sorry Business:** in the event of a death in the family, relatives are obliged to provide hospitality to extended family and community. This invariably requires members of the immediate family of the deceased person to provide food and accommodation for 30-50 members of the extended family and friends who are attending the funeral and have often travelled long distances to pay their respects. The family may have large numbers of guests for periods ranging from two weeks to a month. It is a sad fact that Sorry Business is an all too frequent occurrence in Aboriginal communities and obviously is a contingency that is extremely difficult to plan for. It has not been unknown for Aboriginal community-

¹ NAIDOC stands for the National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee. NAIDOC is a celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and an opportunity to recognise the contributions of Indigenous Australians in various fields. Activities take place across the nation during NAIDOC Week which is in the first full week of July. Retrieved from. <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/indigenous-australians/programs-services/recognition-respect/naidoc-week>



controlled health services (ACCHS) to use aged care package funds to buy grocery items to assist care recipients to meet the obligations of Sorry Business.

- **Care of grandchildren:** there is a community expectation that older people will provide care for grandchildren when needed. Once again, aged care package funds have on occasion been used to purchase grocery items to help care recipients in meeting these family obligations, when family circumstances require it.

The current consultation draft guideline allows a care recipient to reserve 10% of their packaged fund for contingencies. However, current guidelines do not allow package funds to be spent on food. This should be rectified. The amended guidelines should allow for approved providers to purchase food with package funds, where culture and exceptional circumstances such as Sorry Business make this necessary.

- **The need to connect with Country**

Aged care services which support the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal people must acknowledge and support their connection to country.

“Country refers to everything including the land, air, water and stories of “Dreaming”, being dynamic and multilayered, forming the rules, norms and beliefs of existence between species, humans and connection to ancestral beings. It is more powerful and holds sincere meaning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because there is little room to separate themselves from Country as they are embedded within it. Connection to Country is central to Aboriginal peoples’ existence and central to their wellness; disconnection from Country may contribute an extra layer to distress and inequality”^{vi}.

Many Aboriginal people, particularly those residing in metropolitan areas, must travel a considerable distance to return to Country. Approved providers can support the care recipient’s connection to Country by allowing allocation of package funds to cover travel costs (e.g. petrol money or cost of train/bus tickets for the person and their carer). This should be embedded in the finalised guidelines as part of an expanded definition of “respite” (p43, p46)

- **Social Inclusion: in particular, participation in significant community events**

As previously noted, maintenance of community connection is integral to the health of Aboriginal people. The guideline currently lists “Leisure, interests and activities” described as “encouragement to take part in social and community activities that promote and protect the consumer’s lifestyle, interests and wellbeing” amongst its listing of potential Support Services for recipients of Level 3 & 4 packages. However the guideline also expressly prohibits allocation of package funds to:

- Travel and accommodation for holidays; and
- Entertainment activities such as tickets to sporting events.

The following examples are drawn from Victorian experience, but serve to illustrate the broader principle. Annual events which are of particular significance to Victorian Aboriginal people include:

- Celebrations associated with NAIDOC Week, including the NAIDOC Ball and NAIDOC Elders luncheon
- Dreamtime at the G – AFL football match held at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.



These events are all held in Melbourne, but provide a social focus to enable community members and family across Victoria to connect. Similarly, there are a range of activities in Seniors' week that also provide opportunities for community to connect. At present, guidelines exclude using contingency or other package funds on sporting tickets or on accommodation or travel, where previously, ACCHS were able to allocate package funds to subsidise attendance at such events. This needs to be rectified.

In summary, the current draft consultation guidelines do allow flexibility in a number of areas of service provision. The issues which they do not adequately address for Aboriginal people, particularly those living in regional and metropolitan areas, relate to expression of and support for Aboriginal culture. This is compounded by widespread financial disadvantage in Aboriginal communities^{vii}, which increases the negative impact of this lack of cultural safety. In other words, if the financial resources provided by the Aged Care Packages Program cannot be appropriately deployed to support the social and emotional wellbeing of older Aboriginal people it is likely they will not be able to obtain resources from elsewhere to make up this deficit.

ⁱ DoHA (April 2013) Home care packages program guidelines (consultation draft) p 29

ⁱⁱ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (August 2010) *Building Respectful partnerships: the commitment to Aboriginal cultural competence in child and family services* Melbourne p 17

ⁱⁱⁱ DoHA (April 2013) Home Care Packages Program Guidelines: Consultation Draft (April 2013) p33

^{iv} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011) *Older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people* Canberra Cat no. IHW 44 Canberra: AIHW

^v National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Council (NATSIHC) (2003). *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health: Context*. Canberra, NATSIHC

^{vi} Kingsley J, Townsend M, Henderson-Wilson C, Bolam B. Developing an Exploratory Framework Linking Australian Aboriginal Peoples' Connection to Country and Concepts of Wellbeing. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2013; 10(2):678-698 quoted in "VACCHO (April 2013) Submission to the Renewal of the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social Emotional Wellbeing

^{vii} Maggie Walter (2008) *Lives of Diversity: Indigenous Australia* Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia