

31 August 2023

# Position Statement



## Institutional Racism and Cultural Safety

### Background

Racism in Australia's mainstream health care system continues to be expressed through rejection of, and hostility towards, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As well as through provision of often inappropriate health services. Institutional, or systemic, racism is racism embedded in practices, social systems, policies, and processes within institutions that maintain and reproduce avoidable and unfair inequalities (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.). There has been a significant shift in policy from the Victorian government in response to the identification of racism as a key driver of ill-health and wellbeing amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022).

The current practices and policies embedded in the Australian mainstream health system are perceived by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as culturally inappropriate and unsafe. They therefore contribute to limiting access to services, and people abandoning treatment. The experience of racism in the mainstream health system has an ongoing impact beyond the interaction with that health system. Indeed, it is considered a fundamental cause of adverse physical, mental and wellbeing. Racism within the mainstream health system acts as a deterrent to health care access because individuals may avoid healthcare settings for fear of repeated exposure to racism (Truong et al, 2022). Additionally, poor health and fear of the mainstream system significantly limits job opportunities, leading to decrease in opportunity and income.

### Introduction

Freedom from racism and racial discrimination is a fundamental human right enshrined in the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Australian Government, 1975). In 2007 the *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People* was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations (United Nations) further strengthened the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, by including self-determination, participation in decision-making, respect for and protection of culture, and equality and non-discrimination as fundamental human rights for Indigenous peoples.



Both Commonwealth and state governments have identified the need to address institutional racism, as a clear priority, as demonstrated by the following government policies.

The *National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020)* states that government agencies and institutions need to address systemic, daily racism, promote cultural safety, and transfer power and resources to communities. Priority Reform Three – transforming government organisations, clause 59 requires Government Parties to implement six transformation elements, in government mainstream institutions and agencies, which identify and eliminate racism (The Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations and Australian Government, 2020).

While the mainstream health system continues to be challenging in delivering a health service free of racism, the ACCHO Sector has looked to identify the mechanisms involved in providing culturally appropriate care and reducing systemic racism. Findings included: involving Indigenous peoples in key decision-making processes, conduct better community engagement, forge better partnerships between health and other sectors to address the social determinants of health and adopt ways of working which align with Indigenous ways of being and doing (Socha, 2020).

## VACCHO Position

Despite the recent implementation of both national and statewide frameworks targeting racism in the mainstream healthcare system, institutional racism continues to be viewed as the largest barrier to achieving health equity and better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and therefore to Closing the Gap.

Institutional racism must be further understood, acknowledged, and addressed through more comprehensive and targeted policies, legislations, procedures, and measures, as determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

VACCHO believes that further institutional racism markers and indicators must be developed to identify baseline data, targets, and areas for action.

VACCHO supports the development of a complaints and escalation process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accessing mainstream health services; to raise and report experiences of racism in the mainstream health system, with a goal of increasing access and trust in the mainstream health system.

VACCHO has Identified a need for government agencies to undertake further collaborative work to coordinate reporting of racism-related complaints regarding health and wellbeing delivery and that this Information Is used to Identify and respond to systemic racism Issues (Troung et al, 2022).

VACCHO advocates for the inclusion of training for health staff focusing on understanding institutional and direct racism as well as the impact these have on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

VACCHO is calling on the Victorian Government to fully resource a Cultural Safety Accreditation Program (CSAP) to address institutional racism and unsafe behaviour in mainstream health services. Cultural safety must be strengthened and prioritised as a key, mandated requirement of mainstream health services and articulated in a Statement of Priorities. While historically accreditation processes have imposed punitive measures on those who do not comply,

VACCHO intends for the CSAP to support non-compliant organisations to make the changes required to improve.

Aboriginal people and ACCO's are best placed to guide cultural safety practices and inform the CSAP given their lived experience, expertise and understanding of offering culturally safe health and wellbeing services that lead to meaningful engagement and improved outcomes. Significant research has demonstrated that cultural safety is necessary for increasing engagement with Aboriginal people, communities, and families.

Given VACCHO's experience with compliance and quality standards, as well as our key role as the peak body for Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing services, VACCHO is best placed to develop the CSAP.

## Recommendations

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** Mainstream Health Services must, in partnership with the ACCO Sector, review and amend current internal policies to comprise strategies that contribute to eliminating institutional racism and actions, and that they ensure individuals and systems are held accountable when performing racist acts.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** Victorian Department of Health develop a complaints and escalation process to allow an individual/organisation/ community to raise concerns regarding experiences of institutional or direct racism, with a goal of improving immediate and long-term access and trust in the mainstream health system.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** Mandate cultural safety training to all staff working within all the mainstream health service settings that addresses racism, stigma, and discrimination, and that training is designed and delivered by a relevant Aboriginal organisation. This training must be regularly updated, as a priority, to address the consequences of both institutional and direct racism and to encourage change in behaviours.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** VACCHO is fully resourced to establish a Cultural Safety Accreditation Program.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** Ensure that mainstream health and wellbeing organisations embed a consistent cultural safety practice into their model of care.

## References

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