Position Statement 42

Stolen generations

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Definition

It has been nearly two decades since the publication of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report, *The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Their Families: Bringing Them Home* (1997) (the *Bringing them Home* Report), an investigation into the Australian Government's policy of forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. The consequences of this policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to impact on the health and social wellbeing of communities and families. The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) recognises the importance of remembering and continuing to acknowledge this harmful policy, which lasted almost one hundred years, and for psychiatrists as a group to continue to practice and support reconciliation.

Evidence

The *Bringing them Home* Report documents terrible abuses. Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities faced the terror and grief of having children taken from them. Thousands of children suffered severe psychological injury by being deprived of their parents and culture, confined in institutions, beaten, sexually abused and exploited. Some children may have been killed, others took their own lives. Children were lied to and told that their parents or siblings were dead. Parents were told that their children were dead. The mental health implications of these experiences are starkly illustrated in the following account recorded in the *Bringing them Home* Report:

> *It never goes away. Just 'cause we're not walking around on crutches or with bandages or plasters on our legs and arms, doesn't mean we're not hurting. Just 'cause you can't see it doesn't mean… I suspect I'll carry these sorts of wounds 'til the day I die. I'd just like it to be not quite as intense, that's all (HREOC, 1997).*

The policies that led to the Stolen Generation have inflicted deep harm on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the scars of which are still being grappled with today.

The removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was often justified with the paternalistic aims of 'providing' them with opportunities, such as education. However, this was often done in a coercive or damaging manner, with parents being made to sign forms they did not understand and siblings often being separated and contact with natural family disallowed. In other instances claims of neglect were used as justification for the removal of children, however these claims tended to be unfounded and insignificant compared with the neglect the children experienced following removal, as the following excerpt from evidence given by a woman removed at nine years of age in the 1950s demonstrates:

> *And for them to say she [mother] neglected us! I was neglected when I was in this government joint down here. I didn't end up 15 days in a hospital bed [with bronchitis] when I was with me mum and dad (HREOC, 1997).*

There were also the more sinister motivations of gradually assimilating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture into white culture, leading to the 'dying out' of traditional cultures, languages and ways of life. Children were separated from their families and communities, forbidden to speak their languages or practice traditional beliefs or customs. They were taught that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture

was somehow inherently inferior, as the following statement from a woman fostered at 10 years of age in the 1960s describes:

> *All the teachings that we received from our [foster] family when we were little, that black people were bad… I wanted my skin to be white (HREOC 1997, pp. 135).*

A common theme that spans accounts of people who were removed as children is the trauma of separation from their attachment figures, the confusion of having culture and identity denied and negatively characterised and often grief at the abuse experienced in foster homes and institutions.

This policy, along with other discriminatory policies and practices, has contributed to the lower than average health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations to this day. The ongoing mental health impacts are reflected in the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* Report (OID Report) released by the Productivity Commission in November 2014. The OID Report reflects improvements in many key areas, however mental health, suicide rates and self-harm indicators are all shown to be deteriorating. Experience of racism and the impact of family separation are identified in the OID Report as key risk factors leading to these ongoing issues (SCRGSP, 2014).

Evidence cited in the *Bringing them Home* Report and elsewhere shows how the removal of children from their families and communities leads to higher instances of ill health, incarceration, substance misuse, mental health issues, self-harm, suicide and mortality. The psychological trauma caused by forced removal of children has life-long, community and intergenerational mental health consequences.

Part of the reason these practices were allowed to continue for so long, was the inability or refusal of mainstream society to 'see' or acknowledge the harm befalling individuals and communities. This was reflected in denial of existence, denial of Native Title, race-related discriminatory policies, and to this day, a lack of recognition, and continued discrimination, in the Australian Constitution (for more information please refer to Position Statement 68 'Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution' for more information).

Despite recent developments such as the Apology by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2008), the Closing the Gap campaign and above all the resilience and initiatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the current rates of social and emotional wellbeing and physical health problems continue to perpetuate negative outcomes. Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children still continues at unacceptably high rates. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are ten times more likely to be in out of home care than non-Indigenous children, with rates as high as sixteen times more likely in some states (SCRGSP, 2014). Since the publication of the *Bringing them Home* Report, the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has actually increased by 400% (NAPCAN, 2014).

Psychiatrists have a professional, moral and social obligation to comment on social practices and policies which are harmful to mental health. The RANZCP acknowledges that many psychiatrists did not see and understand the destruction and suffering caused by the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and that in some cases the medical profession was involved in the planning and implementation of these policies (HREOC, 1997). It is essential that the history of the Stolen Generations is not 'raked over' for its own sake, but rather that the whole Australian community can learn from past wrongs and work together towards healing (HREOC, 1997).

Recommendations

The RANZCP commits to taking steps to address the harm done by the policy of forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families by applying the following key points, and recommends that psychiatrists, trainees and mental health services similarly incorporate these into their operations and practice:

- Recognise that past practices of state sanctioned abduction of children from parents and from their culture were cruel and harmful.

- Apologise to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for the failure of the medical profession to intervene in these disastrous practices, and instead for having involvement in their implementation.
- Recognise that Australia, as a nation, needs to take the steps to put right what can be put right and to provide appropriate restitution or compensation to the communities and individuals who have been injured by these policies.
- Support calls for a referendum for constitutional change recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In particular, the removal of Section 51 (xxvi) and Section 25 from the Constitution and the insertion of new Sections allowing the government to pass laws for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and banning racial discrimination. For more information please refer to RANZCP Position Statement 68 'Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution'.
- Acknowledge the need for continued vigilance and scrutiny of current policy which may impact adversely on the health and welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to advocate against these.
- Support those policies and programs promoted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as strengthening, empowering and healing initiatives.
- Be aware of the impact of the Stolen Generations and the repercussions that continue to the present day. Be mindful of the impact of dislocation from land, family, culture and community on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples both in the past and in the present. Apply care and creativity in working around these issues and avoid replicating past trauma.
- Support individual psychiatrists, trainees and other practitioners to develop a full understanding of the role of complex trauma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presentations.
- Develop cultural competency and practice in a way that supports and respects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values, culture and history, including an understanding of the history of the Stolen Generations and its ongoing impacts.

References

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