

Ethical Guideline 11

Principles and Guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health

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Authorising Committee:	Board
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Background

The Royal Australian New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) is firmly committed to supporting the entitlement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to effective mental health care which is appropriate to their culture and needs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people suffer levels of mortality, morbidity and compromised wellbeing far in excess of non-Indigenous Australians. As a result of ill-formed perceptions and assumptions about the values and ways of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, substantial errors of judgment in policy and approach have had a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; who remain socially and economically disadvantaged and continue to experience the historical legacy of colonisation and the destruction of their culture.

While there has been some improvement, much remains to be done to ensure the genuine recognition of the fundamental values and principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures within Australian society and its institutions.

Mental health professionals within Australia have been slow to respond to the social and clinical needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the response has often been from a biomedical perspective ignoring the important cultural, social and historical context of their communities. Such a perspective fails to take into account of the strengths and resilience of cultures and populations.

Openness to new models and the modification of old ones

It cannot be assumed that the ethical and clinical models derived from a western individualistic viewpoint can be automatically applied to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities. Nor should we assume we have a mandate to automatically apply such models. That is not to say that such models are not useful; it is more that parts of such models, in some circumstances, may need to be discarded or greatly modified.

Health Professionals and Stereotypes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Peoples

Health professionals and scientists have considerable influence in the creation of stereotypes and over their eventual abandonment. At times, health professionals have contributed to the development of pejorative and disempowering stereotypes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. On the other hand, health professionals have considerable influence over the beliefs and practices of the wider community and can make great contributions to breaking down prejudice and unfair practices. Psychiatrists have an important part to play in the removal of prejudice from mental health services and the encouragement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community efforts to improve mental health and social and emotional well being.

Participation and Partnership

Historically, the control and delivery of health services in and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have not involved their participation and the profession of medicine and the discipline of psychiatry have been very slow, by comparison with other Anglo settler societies (Canada, the United States and New Zealand) in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people entry into the professional workforce.

Political Implications

Health professionals need to be aware that interventions within the arena of health necessarily have political implications. Involvement in this area of professional practice often involves challenging government policy and community attitudes which have the potential to impact negatively on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social, emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing.

In working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is imperative to acknowledge the history, and bridge the difference in cultural outlooks to find a fair, respectful and ethical way forward. The RANZCP have prepared the principles and guidelines below to help psychiatrists and psychiatric trainees to fulfil these obligations and to work constructively and effectively with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities and organisations.

1 Position

- 1.1 The RANZCP supports the rights of all Australians to access optimal mental health care and appropriate mental health services.
- 1.2 There is need for a broader understanding of mental health within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that involves a holistic construct of social, emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing.
- 1.3 Effort and resources are required to enhance effective and empathic communication between non-Indigenous professionals and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

2 Principles

To support this position, it is important that the practice of psychiatry instils:

ethical and practice standards that overcome stereotyping and prejudice; that can influence thinking about or behaviour towards individuals and communities.

principles of participation, partnership, respect, negotiation and a willingness to learn in order to make a useful contribution to the mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

respect of the clinical interaction, cultural beliefs and historical events that may influence this interaction

respect of the dignity and human rights of those who seek or require help with mental health or social and emotional problems

awareness and acknowledgement of the psychiatrist's own cultural assumptions to support effective and empathic communication particularly given the asymmetry of power that is often amplified in interactions between mental health professionals and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

3 Guidelines

3.1 *With regard to knowledge and attitude, it is important for psychiatrists and psychiatric trainees to:*

recognise the importance of land, spirituality and culture to the mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

understand and respect cultural traditions as they affect verbal and non-verbal communication

understand that a culturally appropriate and safe environment is necessary for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to resolve mental health problems and do their best to help provide such an environment

recognise that working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people requires special expertise and understanding

recognise that special expertise and understanding of mental health issues is available within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, especially from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people health and mental health workers

recognise that traditional healing practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may have much to offer in the treatment of mental health and social and emotional problems

understand the mental health implications of the history of contact between Australian communities and Australia's mainstream society

understand the tragic impact which attitudes and policies of the mainstream Australian community have had on the mental health and social and emotional well being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and take this into consideration when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

recognise that social injustice, racism and mainstream hostility and ignorance are still causing serious suffering and mental ill health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

recognise that the serious general health problems which burden the lives of so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have, as a significant part of their cause, social, emotional, substance abuse and psychiatric difficulties which are often untreated or inappropriately treated

show awareness of, respect and acknowledge the value systems and protocols which exist in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

resist the stereotyping of any client or patient because of ethnic, cultural or racial background and pay particular attention that this does not happen with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

3.2 With regard to behaviour, it is important for psychiatrists and psychiatric trainees to:

promote the mental health and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities

work to increase their personal understanding of the culture and traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

always treat Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are patients or clients with courtesy and dignity and allow for difficulties and differences in dealing with health care systems

make whatever contribution is possible to the improvement of courtesy, understanding and flexibility in mainstream mental health facilities

treat Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and mental health workers as respected colleagues with special knowledge which can be essential for appropriate mental health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

make every effort to ensure that the language used during consultation does not present a barrier to full understanding and sharing of information and, if necessary, make use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professionals and interpreters to facilitate communication

seek out and utilise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise including traditional and contemporary practitioners

take into account cultural differences when considering the result of any standard evaluative processes.

3.3 *When undertaking research projects involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is important that psychiatrists and psychiatric trainees:*

refrain from undertaking studies which will harm the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in the study or their communities

collaborate with organisations that work specifically with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities where appropriate

ensure that the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community involved and individuals participating in any research study are involved in a proper process of informed consultation

understand the concept of reciprocity in research, in relation to inclusion and benefits by:

- recognising that the knowledge gained from a research project has been provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the study and that such knowledge should be developed in conjunction with them and shared with them.
- undertaking activities with outcomes that advance the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and that are valued by them.
- ensure adherence to the National Health and Medical Research Council [Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research.](#)

Suggested reading

Further information can be obtained the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Peoples Mental Health website: <https://www.ranzcp.org/Publications/Indigenous-mental-health.aspx>

The Australian Indigenous Mental Health website was set up by the members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health Committee behalf of the RANZCP. The purpose of the website is for people to gain both knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health issues. The Committee's aim is to work together with mental health professionals to improve the mental health and life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

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