

NHMRC Public Consultation: Research priorities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health

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About The George Institute for Global Health

The George Institute is a leading independent global medical research institute established and headquartered in Sydney. It has major centres in China, India and the UK, and an international network of experts and collaborators. Our mission is to improve the health of millions of people worldwide by using innovative approaches to prevent and treat the world's biggest killers: non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and injury.

Our work aims to generate effective, evidence-based and affordable solutions to the world's biggest health challenges. We research the chronic and critical conditions that cause the greatest loss of life and quality of life, and the most substantial economic burden, particularly in resource-poor settings.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Program

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Program at The George Institute drives meaningful and ethical research and advocacy to transform the health and well-being of First Nations peoples and communities. Our program is led through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing to generate evidence that privileges Indigenous knowledges through actions that empower communities and people.

Our commitment to research integrity is underpinned by equity, transparency and self-determination and maintains an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander paradigm of health and healing- physical, emotional, social, cultural and spiritual elements of health. Our mission is to create greater health equity for First Nations peoples and communities.

Acknowledgement of Country

The George Institute for Global Health acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation as the Traditional Owners of the land upon which this submission comes. The George Institute also acknowledges the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and lands upon which its research takes place.

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1. What is the research priority (a significant research knowledge gap or unmet need) you are nominating? How would a TCR in this area greatly advance our understanding of this issue? (200 word maximum)

Racism within Australia's health system is a major barrier to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' access to culturally safe health care and impacts the ability to receive the same quality of health care services as non-Indigenous Australians. It is imperative we advance our knowledge and evidence within this significant gap to ensure that our health system is culturally safe and responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The *NHMRC Road Map 3: A strategic framework for improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health through research* identifies that research focused on the health system and the social and cultural determinants of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities is needed. Cultural competence, cultural safety and racism in the health system are clearly identified as research priorities. A Targeted Call for Research (TCR) would greatly address the need for evidence and translation and have positive impact upon better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that arise from racism within the health system.

2. What are the relevant Australian Government priorities and/or Ministerially-agreed State and Territory health research priorities linked to your nominated priority? (200 word maximum)

- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan has a vision that the Australian health system is free of racism and inequality, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to health services that are effective, high quality, appropriate and affordable.
- National Framework for Continuous Quality Improvement in Primary Health Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People 2018-2023 is a commitment by State, Territory and Commonwealth governments and organisations to build a sustainable, coordinated and responsive health care system that is comprehensive and culturally safe.
- The National Safety and Quality Health Standards User Guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health outline six specific actions that health service organisations are required to address to improve the quality of care and health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- The Closing the Gap Partnership (March 2019) established a formal agreement partnership between the Commonwealth Government, State and Territory governments, The Coalition of Peaks and the Australian Local Government Association. The partnership developed priority reforms informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; formal partnerships and shared decision making; building the community-controlled sector; transforming government organisations; and, shared access to data and information at a regional level.

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3. How would a TCR in this area contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and improve health outcomes for the individual and/or community? (200 word maximum)

Systemic racism within Australia's health system significantly impacts access to quality and culturally safe healthcare, which ultimately impacts the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

A position statement from the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association, '[Racism Within Australia's Health System](#)', reported on findings from a 2015 analysis of more than 250 national and international studies and found a clear link between racism and poor mental health, including depression, anxiety and psychological stress, as well as poor general and physical health. Furthermore, coronial inquest data and associated findings show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have died of preventable or avoidable conditions at unacceptably high rates including from clear and ongoing inadequacies in care and implicit bias within Australia's health system.

A TCR on racism within Australia's health system will contribute to the development of crucial evidence to be used for implementation of improved healthcare delivery, workforce interventions and system effectiveness. This research would directly influence the demand for culturally safe environments and systems free of racism. This will assist in addressing the conditions that allow racialised health inequalities to persist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

4. How will the TCR reduce the burden of disease on the health system and Australian economy? (200 word maximum)

Well known disparities exist in health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compared to non-Indigenous Australians. The life expectancy gap is 11.5 years for men and 9.7 years for women, as well as increased rates of chronic disease ([Australian Institute of Health Welfare, 2017](#)). Hospitalised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have higher rates of discharge against medical advice, re-admission and mortality ([Katzenellenbogen, J.M., et al, 2013](#)). This elevated burden of disease contributes to significant utilisation of health services.

A recent review on quality care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ([Mackean et al. 2020](#)) found that Aboriginal health workers improved quality indicators for patients in primary health settings, although highlighted an urgent need for more research, particularly within acute care settings.

Although existing research provides greater awareness of the effects of racism in healthcare, a TCR into racism from a health systems perspective would focus on the whole system of influence, rather than one problem domain. Research focussed on racism within the health system that centres on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander definition of health and healing has the potential to significantly reduce the economic impact of disease burden on our entire health system.

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**5. Are there any reports or findings that support your nomination of the suggested topic?
(200 word maximum)**

There is now considerable research and recognition that racism is a key determinant of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023](#) recognises racism as a key health determinant and has a vision for the Australian health system to be “free of racism and inequality and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to health services that are effective, high quality, appropriate and affordable.”

While there is increasing evidence that the impacts of racism on health are exercised through institutional mechanisms, it has been recognised this can be particularly difficult to measure in standard epidemiological studies. This has led to an urgent call for research into systemic and setting-specific racism ([Paradies, 2018](#)).

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the capability of health systems and the Black Lives Matter movement revealed both societal and institutionalised racism. Within the context of this global movement, a [media release published by the Medical Journal of Australia](#) called for an explicit financial commitment from the National Health and Medical Research Council that attends to the nature and function of race in racialised health inequities.

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