



# 2014

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs  
Inquiry into the harmful use of alcohol in Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Communities



## HealingFoundation

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People

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## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation is an independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that focuses on healing our community.

The Healing Foundation was established in 2009 on the first anniversary of the Apology to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It addresses the profound legacy of pain and hurt in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives caused by colonisation and other past government policies, including the removal of children from their families. To date we have funded over 90 healing programs across Australia. Emerging data generated from these programs is contributing to building an evidence base for effective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing strategies.

### Our healing story to date

Since its establishment, the Healing Foundation has been working with communities to address their healing needs by:

- funding 92 projects across the nation, many of which involved community-level interventions for healing
- employment for more than 1,165 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people<sup>1</sup>. 28% of these positions have been in remote contexts. Currently over 35% of all funds the Healing Foundation provides to communities is expended on employment.
- over 12,000 community members provided healing and trauma support services
- supporting the capacity and leadership in communities to respond to trauma through funding community education and workforce development initiatives
- facilitating community Healing Forums in Central Australia, North Queensland and the Torres Strait
- contributing to an evidence base about healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through data collection and analysis
- supporting strong program design and development through implementation support and building evaluation processes.

### Executive Summary

There is no doubt that alcohol abuse is a significant issue in a number of Aboriginal communities and families. However, alcohol abuse is a symptom of pain and distress in the human condition. It is not an addiction that occurs without causal factors.

The impact of colonisation and its outcomes, including the forced removal of children from their families, dislocation of our people from their land and culture and the marginalisation of our people has led to significant trauma that has been passed from one generation to the next. The use of alcohol to manage this pain has led to increased levels of distress for individuals and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Each project provides data on the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed by the project as part of the six monthly reporting requirements. This figure may include individuals employed by projects who have worked across multiple reporting periods and/or various funded projects and therefore may have been counted more than once.

Our work is finding that many of our people are caught in feeling mad or bad and as such do not seek support for their loss and grief and distress. Instead negative ways of managing this are utilised.

The Healing Foundation believes that along with targeting issues of supply that there needs to be a significant focus on developing not only treatment services but community led and developed responses that are holistic in nature. The Healing Foundation believes meaningful engagement with communities to work with them to address seemingly intractable social problems will lead to the restoration of harmony and balance back into our communities.

A greater focus needs to be had on driving lasting and real change that has an integrated strategy at its core. This would include:

- Healing as the platform for driving change including the development of healing centres that are holistic; have a treatment focus and utilise Indigenous knowledge systems
- A greater focus on trauma and the development of trauma informed services
- An integration between social emotional wellbeing services and alcohol and drug treatment services
- A renewed focus on social and emotional wellbeing and the importance of a focus on mind, body and spirit in all policy and practice
- Community led and developed approaches including development of community healing strategies
- Renewed focus on building the Indigenous workforce in health and social and emotional wellbeing to enable localised responses

We commend the Parliament on this focus and look forward to being involved in the development of solutions from this inquiry to ensure effective outcomes for our people.

## Background issues

Overall estimations show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are less likely to consume alcohol than the wider population (49% compared to 84%) (Dawe et al., 2007; Northern Territory Government, 2007). However, minority Indigenous populations are found to have the highest level of very risky alcohol consumption when compared to the general population (Dawe et al., 2007). Despite evidence that child protection applications in which alcohol is listed as a major concern show no difference between Indigenous and non- Indigenous populations, it has been estimated that up to 15% of Indigenous children in some states live in households where parents abuse alcohol (Dawe et al., 2007).

### *The Impact of Trauma*

Indigenous communities across this nation have suffered as a result of colonisation. They have experienced wave after wave of debilitating shocks and traumas including massacres, forced removal of children, forced removal from country, the destruction of Indigenous forms of governance and community organisation, and the breakdown of family and community functioning. This experience has left individuals, families and communities in immense pain. The outcome of

many of these external acts has been to generate a wide range of trauma and pain-based behaviours (eg violence & substance abuse) within our people that has been passed from generation to generation within communities, creating an ongoing cycle of dysfunction and disharmony.

*“We worry all the time for this land and our people. Especially when we see and live in the shadows of the painful effects of dispossession, oppression, racism and neglect. And when we see how alcohol is being used to mask this pain in our community and how it creates more pain” ( J Oscar, community member and CEO of Marninwarntikura, in Yajilara (Directed by M Hogan, Reverb,2009) Social Justice Commissioners report 2010 pg 71)*

Healing Foundation research has found misuse of drugs and alcohol was the second greatest community issue stemming from trauma. Substance abuse was most commonly felt by all respondents in the study to be an area, which if addressed, could reduce the impact of trauma on Indigenous people. The Healing Foundation’s research suggests that drug and alcohol services are a critical partner in the community healing process and health promotion. (Training and Education needs analysis “The Journey to Healing” 2011)

The Historical context of Alcohol abuse in Aboriginal communities must also be understood to be enabled to develop appropriate solutions. As outlined in the Social Justice Commissioners report in 2010 the example of the history of alcohol abuse in the Kimberley region provides an example of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people utilise alcohol to deal with the overwhelming and distressing nature of their context.

### **Text Box 3.1: History, trauma and alcohol abuse**

After the period of frontier violence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Aboriginal people worked on stations for little or no wages. For decades Aboriginal people were the backbone of the industry. Without the Aboriginal women and men who sheared the sheep, mustered the cattle, built the fences and windmills and cooked the food, the pastoral industry would not have been able to operate. Then in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the equal wage decision for Aboriginal stock workers was implemented in the Kimberley, our people were discarded.

We were treated with contempt and expelled on mass from the stations. Aboriginal people throughout the valley resettled in congested, squalid conditions. In the early 1970s the population of Fitzroy Crossing rose from 100 to over 2000 people within two years. It became a tent-camp of refugees fleeing a humanitarian disaster.... Like many such people alienated from their lands, alcohol abuse started and it got worse and worse over the years.

At first only the older men and middle aged men drank, then some of the young men and then more and more women and then teenagers, some of them quite young. The grog has affected every single person in the valley at one level or another. Aboriginal people in the valley have identified grog as the most important health priority that must be confronted. (pg. 80 Social Justice Commissioners report 2010)

Whilst restrictions have shown to be effective in reducing supply they have not addressed the complex issues of treatment and rehabilitation that are necessary. Addictions are not solved by reduction on access alone and often a reduction of supply in one location pushes issues into another location. Little emphasis has been given to meaningful ways to make changes for our communities and certainly in this area minimal work has been undertaken in assisting Indigenous communities to come up with their own solutions. Where local communities have led and developed their own solutions, such as in Fitzroy Crossing, these have been more effective strategies. However, much work needs to occur to support communities to be enabled to have a multifaceted approach.

*“The grog restrictions were never intended to be a panacea for the enormous social disadvantages we face. What we have to imagine is a long term and permanent healing of the gaping wounds that arise from alcohol abuse and violence. This will require collaboration and cooperation” (J Oscar, community member and CEO of Marninwarntikura, Through women’s hearts – Indigenous people, history, environment and an inclusive future (Speech delivered at WA Women’s Advisory Council Conference, Perth, 14 June 2010), p 8.*

Alcohol abuse does not only affect individuals and their families. The interconnected nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities means that whole of community approaches are required to make lasting change.

## What works?

Evidence certainly points to the fact that a reduction in supply has a positive effect in enabling a circuit breaker in communities that are overwhelmed by grog and its impact. However, a reduction in supply alone will not enable long term and lasting change. Many dry communities now face the scourge of drugs as a substitute for grog, causing many of the same social issues such as violence that alcohol did. Thus a failure to address the casual factor of trauma will not result in sustainable change.

The greatest achievement by a community in addressing the issues of alcohol abuse and its impact is witnessed through the work of the leaders in the Fitzroy Valley. But as outlined by the Social Justice Commissioner this has some unique lessons to be learnt in how to achieve similar outcomes across our nation.

- A significant portion of the community at the women’s bush camp reached agreement that there was a problem that needed addressing.
- The campaigners sought the support and endorsement of the elders and the local community leadership before taking action to restrict alcohol.
- Key government partners were engaged but the process remained community driven
- The restrictions were initially confined to a six month trial period and extended only after evaluation, consultation and establishing evidence of its positive impacts
- The approach was reviewed after the trial period and the communities were able to express their responses to the alcohol restrictions

- The Fitzroy Futures Forum was formed when community leaders identified a need for a platform for communication between the local communities and government service providers
- Trusting relationships were built between the communities and government representatives over time
- The Fitzroy Futures Forum offered residents an opportunity to share their views on the future of the Valley and acts as a two-way information exchange that gives voice to local concerns and informs the progress of projects and programs.

This correlates with the Healing Foundation's own research that shows locally driven responses and local leadership are critical to quality outcomes being realised.

The 1997 National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families recommended that a new framework based on self-determination of the wellbeing of Indigenous children and young people be realised. The Inquiry called for, among other things, the eventual transfer of responsibility for children's safety and wellbeing to Indigenous peoples (Wilson 1997, Recommendation 43).

The ongoing tendency to identify issues and solutions from a non-Indigenous perspective continues to act as a barrier to improving the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Many program approaches currently hold individuals and communities accountable for factors beyond their control. They also fail to ensure community control, empowerment and self-determination, corroding the foundations for effective change and improved outcomes. The safety and wellbeing of our children and young people will only truly be realised by empowering families and communities to articulate their own needs, determine the solutions, and design, develop and deliver services using Indigenous knowledge systems.

The Healing Foundation strongly supports increased integration of mental health and drug and alcohol services. As an example, the Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation in western NSW has recruited a team of specialist Mental Health and Drug & Alcohol (MHDA) workers to assist the integrated Primary Care Teams to develop systems skills and knowledge required to deliver basic MHDA services. Anecdotal information indicates that this approach has led to increased understanding of and compliance with medications for patients with chronic diseases (e.g., diabetes). Further, reduced levels of stress associated with the illnesses seems to facilitate improved lifestyle factors (e.g., dietary), contributing to better overall treatment. Although not trauma focussed, the combination of primary health and MHDA staff seems to be contributing to improved treatment and potentially better outcomes for some clients.

### **What has been missing – considerations for the future?**

Healing is a process that individuals, families and communities undergo that restores control over their lives. Healing touches the essence of who we are as human beings and helps us reclaim our spirit as Indigenous people standing strongly in our culture and proud of our identity as Australia's First Peoples. Healing involves a range of activities including at times therapeutic measures that assist individuals and families address the psychological distress that causes inertia and paralysis and

makes it virtually impossible for many of our people to participate meaningfully in the opportunities that are available to them in employment, education and economic development, not to mention the ability to take control of their health issues. Cultural activities, connection to culture and strength of identity play a central role in healing.

The Healing Foundation believes meaningful engagement with communities to work with them to address seemingly intractable social problems will lead to the restoration of harmony and balance back into our communities. Our people living and thriving in Healthy, peaceful communities are the key to achieving sustainable employment outcomes over the medium to long term. Creating the high expectations of success through meaningful work will enable our people to have dreams about the future and enable them to achieve those dreams.

Healing leads to our people holding hopefulness about the future, enables people to take responsibility for improving their lives, being able to do the hard yards required to restore dignity to their lives (being able to do what it takes).

Going on a healing journey is an act of courage because the disharmony in our lives is profound. This disharmony is represented by a range of 'symptoms' affecting our daily lives:

- Poor health
- Homelessness
- Domestic & Family violence
- Mental Illness
- Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder
- Suicide
- Poor education outcomes
- Unemployment
- High rates of imprisonment
- Alcohol & Drugs

These problems have been likened to crocodiles that prevent us from swimming the river of life to reach the opportunities waiting for us on the river bank. To improve outcomes for our people we must address the root causes of these 'symptoms', not just tackle to the symptoms themselves. We need to go deeper. We need to work with our people in a more meaningful and deeper engagement that respects their culture and believes in their underlying strength to take up the challenges they face and overcome them.

### **Trauma Informed service delivery**

If we are to effectively respond to the deep hurt and pain many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced, we must adapt our responses to make use of the promising research coming out of the trauma field. There is increasing evidence that services that adopt a trauma-informed approach, incorporate recent learnings about the physical and psychological effects of trauma, and that respect and draw on the ancient wisdom of Indigenous cultures are most successful in facilitating healing and recovery (van der Kolk 2007).

Trauma informed services are based on a deep understanding of trauma and the impact trauma has on individuals, families and communities. The core principles of delivering trauma-informed services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community are:

- Informed by an understanding of trauma and its impact on individuals, families and community groups

- Promote safety by creating spaces which physical and emotionally safe for healing to occur
- Ensure cultural competence of staff and delivery of culturally appropriate service activities
- Ensure self-determination by supporting client control over the design of the service
- Share power and decision making across all levels of the organisation
- Integrate care by bringing services together to provide holistic support for clients
- Support positive relationship building
- Enable recovery by adopting a strength-based approach

(Adapted from Atkinson, in press)

### ***Community Healing Strategy***

The Community Healing Strategy model developed by the Healing Foundation is a new and innovative approach to assisting communities in leading and directing their own healing. It is a genuine mechanism with which to facilitate community empowerment. The development of the community healing approach has been informed by the evidence of what works to address trauma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.<sup>2</sup> This includes linkages between social and economic development and healing to ensure communities are strong, healthy and able to take advantage of opportunities available to them.

A Community Healing Strategy is comprised of a number of key elements, each of which has been shown to be essential to the effectiveness and long-term success of the strategy:

- Community healing forums or gatherings – improving community functioning and understanding
- Community healing plans – cementing real change and actions
- Implementation support – training, coaching and mentoring for success
- Community wellness report cards – communities measuring their own change
- Healing workforce – driving quality healing outcomes through workforce development
- Holistic, integrated healing responses – linking healing, employment, education and economic development

Through the delivery of the 92 projects we have funded we are contributing to creating a supportive environment for healing. The projects work at individual, family, community and systems levels to create the psychological space in which healing can take place. Whilst the healing journey is unique to each individual, a supportive environment for healing is required if change is to be enabled. This is especially important due to the collective identity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. At the individual and family level, the projects have provided participants with knowledge of how trauma has impacted on their lives, and an understanding of their needs for healing. However, it is difficult for individuals and families to undertake their healing journey if the environment around them does not support their healing needs. This is why the creation of a supportive environment for healing is essential.

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<sup>2</sup> A detailed analysis of this evidence can be found in the Healing Foundation publication: *The Case for Community Healing Strategies: An Evidence Review*



## Healing Centres – community led treatment approaches

The Healing Foundation has been exploring the development of Healing Centres as a means to more holistically meet the social and emotional wellbeing needs of our communities. A healing centre is a space which supports healing work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While there is a natural diversity in how healing centres are structured, staffed, funded and operated, and across the activities which each centre supports, a number of common design principles can be identified. Healing centres:

- Are physically, socially and culturally safe and meaningful spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and for the community which they serve in particular
- Are founded from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldview, and strengthen connections between families, communities, land and culture.
- Are developed, led and primarily staffed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but also draw on complementary skills from mainstream partners and professions.
- Are operated with and for their own communities, and work to empower individuals and communities to overcome the causes and symptoms of trauma.
- Facilitate healing through an experimental approach and emphasis on ‘what works’, drawing on both traditional and modern healing practices.

There is a strong body of evidence drawing on international experience which demonstrates that cultural healing works. Healing centres have been proven as one of the most effective investments made in Canada to prevent the negative health and wellbeing outcomes associated with intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous communities<sup>3</sup>.

A final report of the Canadian Aboriginal Healing Foundation found that ‘properly funded and community administered Indigenous healing centres have led to significant reductions in many of the most socially damaging problems (including suicide) in families and communities impacted by the residential school system<sup>4</sup>.

Experts in the field of mental health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians cite healing centres as a promising approach to realise the many social and economic benefits of increased cultural, mental, emotional and physical wellbeing, amongst them reduced youth suicide rates. We have attached a full copy of our Healing Centre’s report (see appendix) for your consideration. Healing treatment centres are in development nationally and have the potential to assist to provide holistic services for those of our people who wish to overcome the debilitating impacts of their use of substances to deal with their issues.

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<sup>3</sup> Silburn, S, G. B. (2012). Preventing Suicide among Indigenous Australians, Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice.

<sup>4</sup> Aboriginal Healing Foundation (Canada). (2006). Final report of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. Ottawa: AHF.

## Developing the Indigenous workforce

Dealing with trauma and its consequences including depression, anxiety, alcohol and substance misuse, family and domestic violence, requires significant skill to ensure that harmful practice and further trauma does not occur. Added to this many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counsellors are working with complicated family relationships and within a community setting where there are often concerns about confidentiality.

However, this is not rationalised by having mainstream health services provide counselling or alcohol and drug services. Many mainstream services lack cultural competency, skill and knowledge and can continue to pathologise our people. In our experience many mainstream health and treatment services lack education about the nature and impact of trauma of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They need skills development in working with trauma including being able to recognise early signs of trauma and the impact on the use of substances to treat mental health issues.

There is a strong need within Australia to develop an appropriately trained and qualified Indigenous social and emotional well-being workforce. The Community services sector is largest growing service sector in Australia and without a focus of development in this area many Indigenous people will miss out on employment in this sector.

Several significant workforce-related issues impede progress in this area including:

- high risk of vicarious or secondary trauma in the Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing workforce, many of whom are supporting kin and community members whilst attending to their own trauma and distress
- over-reliance on non-Indigenous professionals who may not have the requisite skills or experience to assist Indigenous people with trauma presentations
- inequitable distribution of health and social and emotional wellbeing workers across the country.

The Healing Foundation invested \$3.5 million in community education and workforce development projects in almost 50 communities across the country including providing funds to support accredited and non-accredited training for staff in the social and emotional wellbeing, domestic and family violence, child protection, health, and justice and corrections services. An analysis of the first six months of service delivery demonstrated the strength of these types of responses with:

- 1,659 children, young people, men, women and Elders participating in training and education activities
- 86% of participants from the workforce development projects reporting an increased understanding of and ability to respond to people experiencing trauma, loss and grief
- 38% of support services in project communities reporting an increase in use of their services following community education activities.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Further information and analysis of the training and education projects funded by the Healing Foundation can be found in the Healing Foundation publication: *Training and Education – The Journey to Healing Volume 1*