

# compass

2021

spring

Reconciliation Action Plan special edition



**Our RAP calls  
us to action**  
to create more  
opportunities.

for all of  
**us**



Health  
Pathology

# Recognising the complex relationship between good health and self-determination



Health equality for First Nations peoples and communities means so much more than just the absence of illness and disease. It is a sense of wellbeing across intimately entwined cultural, social, emotional and economic dimensions.

Australian governments, working in partnership with a coalition of First Nations' peak bodies, have refreshed the national Closing the Gap reform agenda, negotiating a set of ambitious targets aimed at reducing the disparity between First Nations peoples and other Australians across a range of social and economic indicators. Achieving them will require more

than just improving the quality and accessibility of services.

For First Nations peoples, truly living our best lives means living free of poverty. This requires both meaningful economic participation and having agency over our own lives – the confidence, capability and opportunity to use relevant information, to set important life goals, making informed decisions and choices between genuine alternatives.

The NSW Health Pathology Reconciliation Action Plan recognises the complex relationship between good health and self-determination – the right of First Nations peoples to have the loudest voice in decisions about our own social, cultural and economic development.

The Plan's key pillars of relationships, respect, opportunities and governance reflect the organisation's commitment to going beyond symbolic (albeit important) gestures that commemorate and celebrate First Nations' cultures and histories. The overarching intent is to reassess and transform the relationship between NSW Health Pathology and NSW First Peoples – to one built on

mutual respect and understanding, accountability and partnership. A relationship that supports self-determination; and provides sustained improvement in First Nation community wellbeing.

Since joining the NSW Health Pathology Board in February 2020, I have been struck, not only by the organisation's commitment to delivering quality, innovative and tailored services, but also to embedding First Nations' ways of knowing and doing into the organisation's language, practices and governance. The RAP goes further still, rejecting the prevailing deficit-narrative, responding instead to First Peoples' aspirations for their social, cultural and economic future – not just accessing better, more targeted services, but staying out of the services system in the first place.

**NSW Health Pathology Board member**

**Associate Dean, Indigenous Strategy and Services  
Faculty of Medicine and Health  
University of Sydney**



## Acknowledgement of Country

NSW Health Pathology acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of New South Wales and their special place as Traditional Custodians of this land.

Through their sacred cultures and customs, they have nurtured and cared for this land for thousands of years and continue to do so today.

We would like to pay our respects to the Elders past, present and emerging, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the cultures and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the state.





*NSWHP Chief Executive Tracey McCosker launched our RAP with steering committee members including our Aboriginal Employment Coordinator Colin Gibson, Aboriginal Training Coordinator Angela Pearce, Head of Diversity and Inclusion Rhoda Kiptanui and Trust Accountant Melissa Lydiard.*

*The artwork behind them is by Yagel/ Bundjalung woman Elsie Randall and tells the story of our statewide pathology and forensic service and cultural connection to the communities we serve.*

# Putting the 'action' in Reconciliation Action Plan

It was with great pride that NSW Health Pathology launched its first *Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan* November 2020-November 2022, guided and endorsed by Reconciliation Australia.

The two-year plan details practical actions we will undertake to contribute to reconciliation within NSW Health Pathology and the communities we serve.

It demonstrates our commitment to building respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and achieving meaningful gains in closing the health and justice gaps for these communities.

It formalises our commitment to put Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the centre of all that we do, improve our workplaces for staff and make our services culturally safer and more welcoming for patients, families and communities.

In May, we hosted a National Reconciliation Week 2021 virtual event that demonstrated the commitment of our workforce to making lasting change. We heard from just a few

of our many teams that are already taking action.

Our Lismore laboratory proudly explained its role in the Goorie Mobile Diabetes Complications and Assessment Clinic which is truly closing the health gap for several northern NSW communities. It's a testament to the power of building strong local partnerships (page 4).

At NSW Health Pathology – West, a local team is being assembled to drive RAP initiatives and explore new outreach possibilities, such as sponsorship of and attendance at Indigenous sports events. It's creating jobs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – with the first three trainees in Cert III in Pathology Collection to graduate in September, and a further six trainees in pathology collection and specimen reception to be recruited this year.

We will drive more research that evaluates health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our teams will engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across NSW. This will

ensure we better understand their needs and prioritise research that focuses on answering questions that matter to them.

The event encouraged us all to think about how we can contribute personally and professionally to the important actions we've committed to in our RAP. We look forward to seeing what we will achieve together – for all of us.

I am very proud of the vision we now have to make our unique contribution to reconciliation and closing the gap. It is important that we continue as an organisation and as individuals, to listen to and learn from the First Nations peoples we work with, as colleagues or patients and families in the community. We really must continue to be more aware, respectful and relevant on this reconciliation journey we are on together.

**Tracey McCosker PSM**  
Chief Executive  
NSW Health Pathology



*Lismore laboratory's Karen Kennedy and Trish Law accept the 2020 NSWHP Award for Truly Connected Care from Chief Executive Tracey McCosker PSM and NSW Health's Dr Nigel Lyons who is a member of the NSWHP Board.*

## Path in Boots is winning awards and closing the gap

Delivering truly connected care that is closing the gap is an achievement dear to the hearts of three scientific staff from our Lismore Core Laboratory.

Karen Kennedy, Steve Alvarez and Trish Law volunteered to be trained to support a multidisciplinary diabetes clinic for Aboriginal people in Northern NSW. A fourth colleague, Ajit Singh, will soon join them.

The Goorie Diabetes Complication Assessment Clinics are for Aboriginal clients aged 15 and over who have Type 2 Diabetes.

Rather than get patients from distant Aboriginal communities to come to Lismore, health professionals travel

to them: pathology staff, a physician, general practitioner, diabetic educator, dietician, ophthalmologist, pharmacist, podiatrist, renal nurse, exercise physiologist and Aboriginal health workers.

Our scientific staff return to the same Aboriginal communities each month to build rapport and trust. They pack a mobile 'lab' of equipment into the boot of a car referred to as 'Path in Boots'.

The mobile lab is the first stop for patients attending the clinics. They give a urine sample and have their bloods collected and within 20 minutes, get their results which they

take with them in a folder to see the other health workers who provide lifestyle, diet and medication advice. When the clinics finish, our staff join the other health workers in case conferences ensuring patients receive the highest level of individual attention and care.

The team won the 2020 NSW Health Pathology Staff Award for Delivering Truly Connected Care. The initiative is a past winner of the NSW Health Aboriginal Health Awards for Excellence in Service Delivery as a team.

# The friendly face of change



Latoya Faulkner is helping to provide a safe and welcoming environment for Aboriginal patients from Kempsey and surrounding areas.

The proud Dunghutti woman, 26, joined NSW Health Pathology six years ago as a blood collector after attaining a Certificate III in Pathology Collection.

Her presence has brought comfort and assurance to residents at the Booroongen Djugun Aged Care Facility where she visits once a week to take bloods. She has also encouraged more Aboriginal patients to attend our busy Kempsey Hospital collection centre.

Now studying for a Certificate IV in Pathology, her work with us has expanded to the laboratory where patient specimens are transported for safe and timely processing and reporting of results.

"I think it makes Aboriginal people more comfortable and culturally safe having their bloods taken by another Aboriginal person," she said.

"Now I am learning more clinical skills, there is also the opportunity to encourage others into this work, when they know the extent of what you can do."

Scientific Officer Sandra Haydon said Latoya is a highly skilled dedicated phlebotomist, a role model for her community who shows respect and compassion to all patients.

"We are fortunate to have Latoya as a valued member of our team," she said.

NSW Health Pathology provides specimen collection and testing, and collections training, for the Durri Aboriginal Corporation Medical Centre, Kempsey.

It has opened collection centres at Bawrunga Aboriginal Medical Service (BAMS) locations at Nambucca and Macksville.

## Building from within

The recruitment, retention and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff is a key opportunity identified in our Reconciliation Action Plan that will help us close social, economic and health gaps.

In recent years, increased support and resourcing has seen the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff employed by NSW Health Pathology grow from 0.40% in July 2017 to 1.35% in June 2021.

This puts us on track to meet our target of 3% of overall workforce.

But we're not stopping there.

"Creating a nation, strengthened by respectful relationships between the wider Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is something that NSW Health Pathology is passionate about," our Aboriginal Employment Coordinator Colin Gibson said.

"As an organisation, we believe this starts from within."

NSW Health Pathology's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Recruitment and Retention Program supports our organisation to grow and develop our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce.

"Our focus is to put Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the

centre and build a strong workforce grounded in our shared history," Colin said.

"We want to provide a culturally safe and respectful workplace and position ourselves as an employer of choice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

"We're actively working towards being an organisation that has respectful, responsive and culturally sensitive services for our community."

The program's successes include hosting our inaugural Aboriginal Workforce Forum, piloting an Aboriginal traineeship program at Westmead, and increasing promotion of targeted job vacancies through external Aboriginal employment networks.



# Culturally safe and sensitive care when life's journey ends

The Forensic Medicine service is committed to providing culturally safe and sensitive support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families whose loved ones have been referred to the Coroner following an unexpected or unexplained death.

Recently, we were delighted to welcome Aboriginal Liaison Officers from Local Health Districts across NSW to our Newcastle facility for an afternoon of listening and sharing.

We are acutely aware of the over-representation of First Nations people in the coronial system as a result of the impacts of colonisation and intergenerational grief, loss and trauma. Distressingly, many of these families encounter the coronial process and our service multiple times.

Much is misunderstood about the coronial referral and post-mortem process, particularly in regional areas. Working in partnership with community and partner agencies can help demystify our work and we welcome opportunities to talk about how respect, dignity and care for deceased persons, and their families, is central to everything that we do at Forensic Medicine.



*Aboriginal Liaison Officers from Local Health Districts visit our Forensic Medicine Newcastle facility.*

We know that culturally competent practice and building relationships is at the heart of reconciliation and that there can never be a 'one-size fits all' approach. By asking people what their needs are – individually, culturally, spiritually, as a family, and as a community – we can do our best to be responsive. For example, we will support a family's request for a viewing, memory collation such as hand prints, a smoking ceremony, or other cultural rituals including painting. We also support the leaving of artefacts such as photographs, animal skins, clap sticks or gum leaves with a deceased person who is in the care of Forensic Medicine.

*“During the recent visit, we were humbled to hear one of our Aboriginal Liaison Officer colleagues say, “I’m going to tell my families they don’t need to be afraid. Everyone here is kind and will take good care of your loved ones.”*

**By Danny Nugus,**  
*Senior Forensic Medicine Social Worker, Forensic Medicine – Newcastle, Forensic & Analytical Science Service (FASS), NSW Health Pathology*



*Forensic Medicine staff and ALOs from the Hunter New England Local Health District show blankets used to make viewings more culturally sensitive and supportive.*

## Simple, moving gestures

In the Hunter New England Local Health District, Forensic Medicine social workers meet regularly with Aboriginal Hospital Liaison Officers from across the vast operational area.

At a recent virtual meeting, social workers shared a photo of a quilt and rug made by Aboriginal Elder Louise

Charles in loving memory of her twin granddaughters.

These beautiful items are laid over a deceased person in preparation for a viewing. Our social workers say they receive very positive feedback from Aboriginal families about this simple, moving gesture.



Angela Pearce and Nathalie Duroux deliver face-to-face Respecting the Difference training for our staff.

# Respecting the Difference making a difference

All NSW Health Pathology staff complete NSW Health's Respecting the Difference – Aboriginal Cultural Training in online and face-to-face sessions.

It motivates us to build positive and meaningful relationships with our patients, clients, visitors and staff.

The face-to-face sessions are delivered by Aboriginal Training Coordinator Angela Pearce and Aboriginal Training Officer Nathalie Duroux.

Intimate, interesting and at times confronting, the sessions are helping our workforce understand the impact that racism and discrimination has had on Aboriginal peoples' experience of healthcare.

Accounts of Aboriginal massacres and enslavement, and an interactive role play experience of what it was like for the Stolen Generation, have a powerful and emotional impact on attendees and trainers.

"Some of the information is sensitive because it is about my family. It's still raw for me . . . my mum's and dad's experience growing up and what happened to them," said Angela, a proud Wiradjuri woman from the NSW Central West.

"Someone said to me recently, 'I'm 61 Ange, and I never knew any of this'. Many are just not aware of the true history because they weren't taught it at school."

Nathalie, a proud Bundjalung/Gumbayngirr woman from the NSW Far North Coast, is also committed to helping our staff to understand why health, education and employment gaps exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

"For me, educating on historical events that occurred is important as it helps participants to gain an understanding why there are disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people today," Nathalie said.

The number of NSW Health Pathology staff completing Respecting the Difference Training increased from 25% in 2017 to 62% in October 2020.

Angela believes the face-to-face training is having an impact and high-level support shown by NSW Health Pathology's senior leadership team and its Board, is driving cultural change.

"At first, we'd see a lot of negative body language – heads down, arms folded, wouldn't engage – now we're seeing people hungry to learn, they want to be there," she said.

"Education is powerful, so is an open mind."



*Kristy Waddell, from our Strategic Communications team, is an influencer who leads by example to motivate others to adopt Acknowledgement of Country protocols into their everyday work.*

# The RITE way to respect our First Nations colleagues

*Kristy Waddell incorporates Acknowledgement of Country seamlessly and with quiet respect and feeling into her work every day. She exemplifies our organisational RITE values of Respect and Integrity. She talks to us about the difference between Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country and why they are important to her as a non-Aboriginal person.*

## **What is the difference between Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country?**

Each brings awareness and shows respect to First Nations people, who are the Custodians of the Land. The key difference is who performs them. An Acknowledgement can be made by anybody, First Nations or non-Aboriginal people. They're often made at the start of an event – such as a meeting, speech or formal occasion. Welcome to Country can only be given by a Traditional Custodian of the Land you are on. It is an important

traditional ceremony and can be done through speech, dance, song or ceremony.

## **When should each be used?**

Scott Kneebone, a Bangerang man based in Canberra, has a really easy way to explain the difference: a Welcome is like having a birthday, you say thanks for coming; Acknowledgement is like you're a guest at the birthday, you'd say thanks for having me.

## **What does giving a heart-felt Acknowledgement of Country mean to you?**

It means a lot to me, but it means more to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples because building trust and demonstrating cultural respect are essential if we are to make improvements in the health of First Nations peoples.

It's always a nice way to start a meeting, connecting with Aboriginal

or Torres Strait Islander people in the room. It's also something that doesn't have to be spoken, it can also be in email signatures, signage, on our website, our social media accounts and in publications.

## **How do you feel when you acknowledge country?**

It's the least we can offer and demonstrates a commitment to reconciliation. We can never have a better future for all Australians unless we acknowledge our past and show First Nations peoples empathy, compassion and respect. I get really emotional because it's about bringing people together, embracing people and recognising that even though we may have different backgrounds, we're all connected.

## **Why do you believe it is important?**

Acknowledgement is about showing respect and empathy to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who have experienced significant exclusion from Australian society for many years. Acknowledge First Nations people at our events, meetings or gatherings is one way to help end this exclusion.

At my daughters' primary school, the students start all their assemblies and religious services with an Acknowledgment of Country. It's part of their everyday routine. If an eight-year-old can incorporate this into their daily practice, then surely, we can do it in the workplace as well!

## **Any advice to others to deliver genuine, effective acknowledgements?**

Find out whose land you're on. Do your research, be authentic and be specific. Show respect and be genuine. Take your time when speaking. Adapt to suit your context. There are scripted acknowledgements for our staff on our intranet, or you could try to write one in your voice. Be confident. Speak with purpose. Pop your Acknowledgement of Country in the notes of your phone so it's always there to read from when you need it.