



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Partnership Forums

Australian Government Department of Health Update

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Partnership Forums provide a formal way for members to engage, work together, plan and share information to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The members of each Forum include the signatories to each jurisdictional Partnership Framework Agreement:

- the Australian Government (represented by the Department of Health)
- the state or territory government (represented by the state or territory Department of Health)
- the Sector Support Organisations.

Other guests may be invited to take part in the Forums, including the Primary Health Networks and representatives of the National Indigenous Australians Agency.

The eight Partnership Forums aim to meet 3 to 4 times per year. The *Australian Government Department of Health Update* provides partners with the latest information about the department's work on Indigenous health policies and programs. This includes:

- updates on projects that affect the sector or stakeholders
- tenders, evaluations and opportunities for consultation
- significant policy developments.

Feel free to share this update with your networks. For more information, email Commonwealth.Partnership.Forums@health.gov.au

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New Updates

1. Refreshed National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan

The Department is working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health experts, through the Health Plan Working Group, to develop a refreshed 10-year National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan. The refreshed Health Plan will have a focus on prevention and provide a cohesive and strategic platform to drive improvements against targeted priorities through approaches that embed and consider the cultural determinants and social determinants of health.

While the current Health Plan does not expire until 2023, undertaking the refresh now provides an opportunity to align the Health Plan with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and other whole of population strategies under development. It will also highlight the importance of ensuring that whole of population services and programs are responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The development of the Health Plan is being informed by the extensive consultation processes already undertaken, including the *My Life My Lead* consultations in 2017. Further targeted consultations will continue to occur over the coming months. This includes ongoing engagement with the Partnership Forums.

The refreshed Health Plan is expected to be finalised in the first half of 2021.

2. Draft National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021-2031 (National Workforce Plan)

The draft National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021-2031 (National Workforce Plan), was published for national online consultation in November 2020. Over 900 stakeholders were invited to participate. By 2031, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will represent 3.43% of the Australian working age population (ages 15-64). The National Workforce Plan aims to increase Indigenous employment in the health workforce to reach 3.43% parity.

The National Workforce Plan has been prepared to support multiple Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy reforms, including the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020 and the new National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan.

The National Workforce Plan is an example of national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health policy jointly co-designed, owned and implemented in partnership between governments and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health sector.

The draft National Workforce Plan includes a wide range of actions that can be implemented at a national, jurisdictional or regional level across the health system, to support the attraction, recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the health workforce.

The national consultation closed on 15 February 2021. The National Workforce Plan will be finalised and progressed for government endorsement in May 2021.

Any questions in relation to the National Workforce Plan can be sent to the National Workforce Plan Secretariat at: NATSIWorkforcePlan@health.gov.au.

3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19

The Australian Government set up the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19](#) (the Taskforce) in early March 2020.

The Taskforce is co-chaired by NACCHO and the Department of Health.

Members

The Taskforce includes leaders from:

- NACCHO and their affiliates
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Services
- the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association
- the National Indigenous Australians Agency.

The Taskforce also includes:

- state and territory public health representatives endorsed by the Communicable Diseases Network Australia
- Public Health Medical Officers and communicable disease experts.

Work of the Taskforce

The Taskforce:

- delivers high-level documents endorsed by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) or National Cabinet, including:
 - [guidance for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities](#)
 - essential input to the [COVID-19 national guidelines](#)
 - [early aero-medical evacuation of COVID-19 cases and contacts from remote communities](#)
 - [National Guidance for Urban and Regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities for COVID-19](#)
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific indicators in the Australian National Disease Surveillance Plan for COVID-19.
- provides advice on the Australian Government's COVID-19 response
- ensures the response considers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and needs
- supports stakeholders working together to prepare, respond and plan at the community, regional, jurisdictional and national levels.

The Taskforce remains critical in guiding and advising on implementation of the Australian Government's primary care response to COVID-19 in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. The Taskforce continues to support collaborative preparedness and response planning at the community, regional, jurisdictional and national levels.

The first meeting of the Taskforce in 2021 was on Tuesday 19 January 2021. The Taskforce is focused on the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, and has developed the National COVID-19 Vaccine Strategy's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities Implementation Plan (Implementation Plan). Find out more about the work and role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 on the Department's website.

4. COVID-19 Communication activities

The National COVID-19 Vaccine Campaign launched on Wednesday 27 January 2021. The campaign runs across television, radio, digital, social media and out of home (screens in shopping centres, medical facilities etc.). The vaccine campaign will have three phases:

- the first to reaffirm that the COVID-19 vaccines have been through a thorough, independent approval process;
- the second phase will provide information about how the vaccine will be rolled out and dosage requirements; and
- the third will inform people about how and where to get vaccines.

For each phase of the campaign, information will be tailored for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences. Materials will include artwork created by Wiradjuri artist Jordana Angus. To view the full suite of materials on air please see:

<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/covid-19-vaccination-communication-materials-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples>

Stakeholders can share these materials. Please contact the Department and we will have the authorisation statement at the end removed and files sent.

The Department will also be producing communication assets that can be tailored by organisations. These will include social media tiles, posters, and scripts (for video production and or radio production). Please let us know if there are particular items that you would like developed.

Key campaign messages are in the categories of:

- community benefit
- effectiveness
- science and safety
- government response and oversight
- availability, cost and administration
- information and consent
- processes for the health sector.

A [community engagement kit](#) is also available on the Department's website.

5. COVID-19 vaccine rollout

The most up to date information about the national rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination is online at the [vaccine hub](#). You can also [subscribe](#) to receive regular updates. As work progresses and the pace of implementation increases, the latest information will continue to be available at health.gov.au

The proposed COVID-19 Vaccine Strategy's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities Implementation Plan builds on [Australia's COVID-19 Vaccine National Rollout Strategy](#) released on 7 January 2021. It complements the [Management Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Populations](#) and other relevant guidance developed by the Taskforce. The Implementation Plan will align with the state and territory implementation plans and considers vaccine delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in all settings, including remote locations. The Implementation Plan will continue to develop iteratively as details of the vaccine rollout is finalised, and to ensure that the various plans are consistent and complementary.

The overarching Australian Government approach to vaccine prioritisation has been guided by medical and technical experts. The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) acknowledged that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have an increased risk of acquiring and developing serious outcomes from communicable diseases due to multiple factors. This increased risk is multifactorial, driven by social determinants of health and access to health care.

Vaccination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will commence from phase 1b. Information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about COVID-19 vaccination is on the [Department's website](#).

The Australian Government continues working in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector, and state and territory governments in all aspects of the National Response to COVID-19. This includes the rollout of the vaccine program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout Australia. General Practice-led Respiratory Clinics (GPRCs) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Services will be key vaccine provider sites. Healthcare workers need to complete specific training before they can administer the vaccine.

6. National Guidance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban and regional settings

On 10 December 2020 the AHPPC endorsed the Communicable Diseases Network Australia [CDNA National Guidance for Urban and Regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities for COVID-19](#).

The Guidance is a principles-based guidance document for ACCHS and public health units that focuses on both urban and regional settings.

Key considerations include testing strategies, contact tracing capability, isolation and quarantine facilities, and data and reporting.

This work was informed by jurisdictional experiences of managing outbreaks in urban and regional settings (for example Melbourne and regional Victoria, Brisbane, Sydney).

7. Indigenous interpreting service and translated resources available via My Aged Care

Interpreting service

My Aged Care can connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to an Indigenous interpreting service to provide aged care information in a person's preferred language. To use an Indigenous interpreter, call My Aged Care on 1800 200 422 and ask for an interpreter in your client's preferred language.

For more information on the Aboriginal Interpreter Service, including how to make a booking, visit the [NT Government website](#).

8. New grant opportunity for design of rural and remote primary health care services

In January 2021 the Department, in conjunction with the National Rural Health Commissioner, opened the Primary care Rural Innovative Multidisciplinary Models (PRIMM) grant opportunity. The purpose of PRIMM is to fund design of feasible solutions to address specific primary health care service issues in rural and remote communities and regions. PRIMM funding will enable community-supported models of care to be developed a point where they are ready to trial.

For more information about PRIMM please visit GrantConnect. Grants closed on 8 March 2020.

9. Allied health measures in Residential Aged Care Facilities (RACFs)

On 30 November 2020, the Australian Government tabled a response to the Aged Care Royal Commission's recommendations on COVID-19. This included funding for:

- new temporary Medical Benefits Schedule (MBS) items for mental and allied health support in RACFs, especially those who have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. These items are available until 30 June 2022.

For more information:

www.mbsonline.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/Factsheet-Current

- an allied health group therapy program in RACFs who have had two or more cases of COVID-19. This program aims to improve the physical functioning of residents and is for a 6 month period. PHNs will commission the allied health professions to do this work. Seek more information from your local PHN.

10. Mental health support during COVID-19

The mental health and wellbeing of all Australians remains one of the Australian Government's highest priorities. Since March 2020, the Australian Government has made available more than \$500 million in direct support to respond to the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Australian Government recognises some Australians, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, are more vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic and its associated measures. The Government has responded by providing extra targeted mental health support to these groups, including:

- funding to Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia to create culturally appropriate advice and resources on staying strong and mentally healthy for First Australians. These resources are available in print, online (gayaadhuwi.org.au) and on social media;
- approximately \$3.5 million for Primary Health Networks to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This focuses on people in remote areas who have reduced access to mental health and wellbeing services; and
- funding to the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service to improve the Yarning SafeNStrong support line. Yarning SafeNStrong is a 24/7 confidential crisis line supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians. More information is available at: vahs.org.au or 1800 95 95 63.

11. Renewal of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia (Gayaa Dhuwi) is renewing the 2013 *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy* (NATSISPS). This includes consultation with stakeholders and community members.

Targeted roundtables were hosted over late September and October 2020. They also produced a Discussion Paper and sought views from individuals and organisations who work, or have an interest, in Indigenous suicide prevention.

For additional information on the renewal process, visit Gayaa Dhuwi's website at www.gayaadhuwi.org.au and choose "SP strategy renewal".

12. Perinatal Mental Health and Wellbeing Program

An \$18.5 million open grant opportunity was released under the Perinatal Mental Health and Wellbeing Program between November 2020 - 18 January 2021. This initiative will make sure new

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parents can access support when they need it.

The grants will fund:

- perinatal mental health support services
- perinatal loss and bereavement peer support services
- perinatal mental health promotion and training initiatives.

The program will also provide awareness training and education to ensure culturally appropriate, inclusive and safe support, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We expect to announce the successful applicants under this grant opportunity in late March 2021.

13. Seventh Community Pharmacy Agreement (7CPA)

The 7CPA is an agreement between the Commonwealth of Australia, the Pharmacy Guild of Australia and the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia. It supports consumer access to Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) subsidised medicines through community pharmacies across Australia.

Under the 7CPA the Government will implement reforms to the Closing the Gap PBS Co-payment program. This will reduce the cost of PBS medicines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These reforms will commence from 1 July 2021. Reforms will include expanding the range of health professionals who can register people for the program and enabling all PBS prescribers to issue eligible prescriptions.

As part of the 7CPA, the Quality Use of Medicines Maximised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (QUMAX) program and the s100 Pharmacy Support Allowance will be amalgamated and redesigned into a single Quality Use of Medicines (QUM) program. Additional funding will be available to any eligible Aboriginal Health Service (AHS), regardless of location or governance. Consultations on redesigning these programs are underway.

Consultations about the new Indigenous Dose Administration Aids (IDAA) program are also underway.

14. The National Preventive Health Strategy

The Australian Government is developing a 10-year National Preventive Health Strategy (the Strategy). The Strategy will provide the overarching, long-term approach to prevention in Australia. The aim is to improve the health of all Australians through early intervention, better information, targeting risk factors, and addressing the broader causes of health and wellbeing.

The Strategy will align with commitments made under the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap, as well as the refresh of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan. The Strategy also considers the impact of the wider determinants of health on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Public consultation on the draft will take place in early 2021. If you would like to be kept up-to-date, please email nphs@health.gov.au. The Strategy is anticipated to be finalised around April 2021.

15. Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol

On 8 December 2020, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) released the revised Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol (the Guidelines). The Guidelines give the Australian population clear and evidence-based advice about alcohol, to help people make informed choices about their drinking. The Guidelines also form the evidence base for future policymaking and educational materials. The Department of Health funded NHMRC to revise

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the Guidelines.

The Department has now engaged the Alcohol and Drug Foundation to plan, develop, execute and evaluate a campaign to increase awareness of, and implement activities related to, the Guidelines. The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education will lead a campaign targeted at women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, which relates to Guideline 3.

You can learn more about the revised guidelines, and access relevant resources through the NHMRC website: www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-advice/alcohol.

16. United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs

The Department is drafting an Australian resolution to put forward at the 64th session of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (12-16 April 2021). The resolution will focus on the importance of culturally focused treatment services for Indigenous peoples. The Department is liaising with the Indigenous Health Division, and external agencies. These include the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), and Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) to develop the resolution text.

The resolution aims to highlight the importance of tailored services to meet the needs of vulnerable members of society and in particular, the specific needs of indigenous populations.

Resolutions will be submitted to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) by 15 March 2021.

17. The Roadmap for Hearing Health

The Roadmap for Hearing Health aims to improve access to high quality hearing services for vulnerable Australians. Roadmap activities supported through the 2020 Federal Budget include improving access to high quality hearing services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

What is the investment?

As part of a broader \$21m Budget initiative, the Australian Government is providing \$5.0 million in 2020-21 to support early identification and treatment of hearing and speech difficulties for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Funding will include:

- \$2.0 million made available through the 2020 -21 Service Maintenance Program for eligible Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services to create quiet spaces for audiology assessments. This targeted competitive grant opportunity closed on 18 December 2020 and applications are being assessed.
- \$3.0 million to advance improvements in hearing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This includes through uptake of the Parent-evaluated Listening and Understanding Measure (PLUM) and Hear and Talk Scale (HATS) assessment tools. The PLUM and HATS questionnaires are available at <https://plumandhats.nal.gov.au>.

The Department is working with the Aboriginal Community Controlled health sector and Hearing Australia to deliver these activities.

18. Antimicrobial stewardship in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population (Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care)

The Commission's Antimicrobial Stewardship in Australian Health Care (AMS Book) was published in 2018, and continues to be enhanced with additional chapters to support AMS in specific settings. As new resources also become available, these will be added as hyperlinks to the AMS Book.

The most recent chapters deal with antimicrobial stewardship (AMS) in general practice, in the care of children, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The AMS Book describes the roles of those responsible for establishing and implementing AMS programs; and how prescribers, pharmacists, infection control practitioners, nurses and midwives can contribute to program success by incorporating AMS principles in their clinical practice.

A copy of the publication is at: [https://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/publications-and-resources/resource-library/antimicrobial-stewardship-australian-health-care National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021-2031](https://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/publications-and-resources/resource-library/antimicrobial-stewardship-australian-health-care-National-Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-Health-Workforce-Strategic-Framework-and-Implementation-Plan-2021-2031)

19. Kava commercial importation pilot

In the 2020-21 Budget, the Australian Government announced a revised implementation timeline for the kava commercial importation pilot. The pilot was announced by the Prime Minister on 11 October 2019. Phase two of a pilot program to ease the restrictions on the commercial importation of kava will commence by the end of 2021.

This pilot recognises the importance of kava to the social and cultural life of Pacific Islanders, including those living in Australia. The pilot will include independent monitoring and evaluation to capture the health, social, cultural and economic impacts, including establishing baseline data. The Office of Drug Control is coordinating the Department of Health's involvement in the kava pilot, and the Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Branch has responsibility for the monitoring and evaluation. A tender process is underway to engage an independent organisation to evaluate the social, cultural, economic and health impacts of the pilot, including on high risk communities.

Routine Updates

20. Evaluation of the Australian Government's investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander primary health care

Allen + Clarke is evaluating the effectiveness of Australian Government's investment in primary health care under the Indigenous Australians' Health Programme (IAHP).

The evaluation has been co-designed with the Department and a health sector co-design group. The evaluation design adapts a place-based approach to provide an in-depth, system analysis of the impact of IAHP funding; and improvements needed at a national, state, regional and local level.

Health Partnership Forum Members were consulted on the 20 proposed evaluation sites.

In response to COVID-19, site engagement was paused in March 2020. A virtual, phased approach to site engagement recommenced in October 2020 to manage COVID related risks.

As at February 2021, ten sites have formally agreed to participate, with further sites likely to sign up in coming months. Three sites have declined.

For more information, visit the evaluation website: <https://www.iahpyarnes.com/>

21. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Blood Borne Viruses and Sexually Transmissible Infections Strategy

Following consultation with key stakeholders in early 2020, on 27 August 2020, Minister Hunt agreed to the Department's implementation approach of the Fifth National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Blood Borne Viruses (BBV) and Sexually Transmissible Infections (STI) Strategy 2018-2022. This includes:

1. use of NACCHO's health network to test, treat, develop and implement BBV and STI prevention strategies that are sustainable and evidence based. A contract was recently executed, details of which are on the AusTender website; and
2. funding to support the continuation and expansion of the TTANGO (Test, Treat AND Go) project. This contract was executed in 2020 and is ongoing.

The Department is progressing two grants processes to:

1. expand, maintain and integrate the BBV and STI Sentinel Surveillance Network (ATLAS); and
2. run an open and competitive grants process to test the market and fund up to ten innovative pilot projects that increase health promotion, prevention, treatment and/or surveillance strategies for BBV and STI in areas of high prevalence.

22. Indigenous Ear Health

The EarTrain Program

EarTrain is a new national training program for primary health care professionals providing care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people including children.

The training will increase participants' awareness and understanding of Otitis Media, and how to reduce, treat and prevent the onset of Otitis Media. It will also build participants' capacity to identify, manage, refer and treat Otitis Media and other hearing conditions.

TAFE NSW delivers the EarTrain program across Australia. For more information contact eartrain@tafensw.edu.au

Parent-evaluated Listening and Understanding Measure (PLUM) and Hearing and Talking Scale (HATS)

PLUM and HATS are evidence-based questionnaires that reveal early signs of hearing difficulty and hindered language development; and provide the foundation for early intervention.

These free tools were developed for health and childcare workers to use. Information is available for parents and families, including tips on listening and yarning skills for children aged 0-5 years.

The PLUM and HATS website is plumandhats.nal.gov.au/. A [recent article](#) about the campaign can be found on the Indigenous.Gov website.

Expansion of the Hearing Assessment Program – Early Ears (HAP-EE)

The HAP-EE initially focused on children in regional and remote areas. It will now deliver annual hearing assessments for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the years before commencing school.

Hearing Australia has begun talking to sector support organisations and ACCHSs in metro areas about this expansion. These conversations will continue over the next few months. For all queries please email hapee@hearing.com.au.

Care for Kids' Ears resources

The Care for Kids' Ears resources include health promotion tools that can be utilised by parents, carers, teachers and health professionals. These provide education about the importance of ear and hearing health, and how to keep ears healthy.

The resources are available to order free of charge (including free delivery) at the [Department of Health website](#), with plenty of stock available:

23. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Services Data Advisory Group – (HS DAG)

A communique will be released following each HS DAG meeting to ensure the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care Services are kept informed of outcomes with regard to the nKPI and OSR data collections. The HS DAG Communique will also publish the next scheduled HS DAG meeting.

<https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-Health-Services-Data-Advisory-Group#communiques>