



The Foundations to Close the Mental Health Gap are in Place – But the Work Lies Ahead

Indigenous mental health and suicide prevention leaders mark World Mental Health Day, 10 October 2019

Indigenous Australians are challenged by double the rates of psychological distress, mental health challenges and suicide more than other Australians, and the data suggests this 'mental health gap' is getting wider. Today, Indigenous mental health and suicide prevention leaders marked World Mental Health Day by making a number of calls to action to close the mental health gap. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership in Mental Health (NATSILMH) Chair Mr Tom Brideson said in Sydney:

While I acknowledge significant progress in recent years to establish the foundations of a national response to closing the Indigenous mental health gap, we should not forget that the work required is ahead of us.

In particular, I am cautiously optimistic about the announcement of a new Indigenous leadership body - Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia - by Health Minister Greg Hunt last month and that the new body will lead in the development of an Indigenous suicide prevention plan with a strong youth suicide prevention component.

This announcement builds on the Australian Health Minister Advisory Council's sign off on the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023 (National Strategic Framework) in 2017. This a comprehensive Indigenous-developed strategy designed to ensure the Australian mental health system is fit for purpose for Indigenous Australians. With these elements now in place, we have a strong foundation for a national effort over the next decade to close the mental health gap.

Professor Pat Dudgeon, Director of the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention, UWA said in Perth:

In addition to the elements Tom refers to, the evidence shows that Indigenous cultural strengths already provide an overarching foundation for the national effort ahead. These

strengths contribute to what we call our 'social and emotional wellbeing'. While this concept can vary among us, its basic message is that strong families, strong communities and strong cultures and cultural identity support Indigenous mental (and indeed physical) health.

While clinical responses to those immediately challenged by mental health issues and suicide are necessary and need significant additional funding and work, we also need to look deeper. Australian governments in particular need to consider that many Indigenous communities need support for longer-term healing and renewal processes, including to address intergenerationally transmitted trauma from colonisation. This includes transmission by behaviours often seen as problems in themselves - family violence and alcohol and drug use, in particular – but that should be substantially addressed through the lens of mental health. This cultural and healing work under community leadership is a big part of the required national effort ahead.

Professor Dudgeon and Mr Brideson closed by saying:

We call on Australian governments to build on the firm foundations our cultural strengths, the establishment of Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia, and the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023 provide to drive a national effort to close the mental health gap over coming decades. Getting these foundations in place has been the result of years of hard work and indigenous leadership, but the critical effort now lies ahead. It requires resources, long-term commitment and a willingness to do things differently and under Indigenous leadership and control.

We also call on mental health services, Primary Health Networks, GPs, and mental health workforce professional bodies to play their part. This includes in training an Indigenous mental health workforce and otherwise working in partnership with our leaders and communities to ensure a 'fit for purpose' mental health system capable of working effectively with Indigenous individuals, families and communities.

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For media enquiries and interview requests for Professor Dudgeon and Mr Brideson contact Nikki Lily on 0408 227 417.

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- For more information on the appropriate reporting of mental illness and suicide see the Mindframe initiative: <http://www.mindframe-media.info>.
- Lifeline: 131 114
- Kids Helpline: 1800 551 800
- Mensline: 1300 78 99 78