



the  
**Lowitja**  
Institute

Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander Health Research

14 August 2014

**The Lowitja Institute –**  
**Statement to the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of**  
**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples**  
**Melbourne – 14 August 2014**


The Lowitja Institute is Australia's national institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research.

The Lowitja Institute works with communities, researchers and policy makers to facilitate research. The voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people informs all of our activities, whether we're conducting community-based research or setting strategic direction. This puts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledge and cultural understanding at the heart of the research process. Our approach ensures that we are more likely to have effective and relevant research outcomes.

The Lowitja Institute has led a project that contributes to the national conversation about constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The project has garnered a high level of support from leading national health and medical non-government organisations, highlighting the importance of constitutional change to health and wellbeing.

Many mainstream health and medical organisations have a commitment and obligation to advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, and appreciate the role of broader, social determinants of health. These organisations also enjoy a high degree of respect and trust in the community and through their memberships, networks and influence, provide a broad base for public support for constitutional change on the basis of health benefit for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. To date, almost 90 organisations have committed to sign a statement of support for constitutional change. We expect that many more will commit over the next few months.

The statement recognises that the higher burden of disease and shorter life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is set against long term economic disadvantage and social exclusion. It states that constitutional recognition would provide a strong foundation for overcoming this burden.



The Lowitja Institute funded research<sup>1</sup> demonstrates that racism is bad for our health and wellbeing. The study found that racism was prevalent in the lives of those Aboriginal Victorians surveyed and that racism is more likely to lead to higher levels of psychological distress and mental health problems. It identifies the need for increased support and educational efforts and development of strategies to promote respect and social cohesion within communities as strategies for change.

The recent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013 - 2023 expresses a vision of a health system that is free of racism and inequality. The Plan also places culture and wellbeing as central to the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Plan, which was developed in close partnership with the National Health Leadership Forum (of which the Lowitja Institute is a member), was endorsed by the previous government. Senator Fiona Nash, in her role as Assistant Minister for Health, has recently announced the Australian Government's commitment to the implementation of the Health Plan.

We appreciate that there will be many factors facing our political leaders that will determine optimal timing for the referendum. We believe, however, that there must be a strong commitment to constitutional recognition— sooner rather than later – and in turn, commitment of sufficient resources to achieve a successful referendum outcome. Our concerns are that if this does not occur, it would have a negative and lasting impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We believe that constitutional change is vitally important for the health and wellbeing Australia's First Peoples. We believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must feel included and connected to Australia in every way and that Australia should embrace its history, identity and culture in order for us to truly mature as a nation.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Mental Health Impacts of Racism Discrimination in Victorian Aboriginal Communities* - A. Ferdinand, Y. Paradies & M. Kelaheer— The Lowitja Institute, 2012; <https://www.lowitja.org.au/lowitja-publishing/L023>