LOWITJA INSTITUTE

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

Lowitja Institute calls on health to be centred in new national AI standards design

Policy statement

Lowitja Institute urges governments to place health, equity, and the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the heart of artificial intelligence (AI) reform. The rapid development of Australia's AI policy and regulatory infrastructure presents an important opportunity to ensure that the benefits of AI are shared equitably, while ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities are protected from emerging risks.

The Australian Government's National AI Plan (released in December 2025) establishes three overarching goals: capturing the opportunities presented by AI, spreading its benefits across the Australian community, and keeping Australians safe. Importantly, the Plan recognises the potential for AI to help close service gaps in areas including health, disability, and aged care. July 2026 saw the announcement of the establishment of a new Office of AI within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the development of Australian Standards for AI. The Government described this as part of a more coordinated national approach to AI, recognising the technology cuts across the responsibilities of government and requires coordinated action rather than a sector-by-sector response.

The Government has also strengthened its focus on AI safety and accountability, with the National AI Plan including the establishment of an Australian AI Safety Institute to monitor emerging AI capabilities, risks and harms, and support regulators and government agencies. In July 2026, the Government also announced a series of AI consumer safety priorities aimed at strengthening protections and accountability as AI becomes more widely adopted.

These developments provide an important opportunity to ensure that health is regarded as a core part of Australia's AI reform agenda and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and decision-making authority is embedded.

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Within this landscape, Lowitja Institute considers it imperative to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised not simply as stakeholders but as leaders in shaping the governance, design, and implementation of AI in Australia.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, health is holistic not merely physical. Connection to Country, cultural expression and continuity, self-determination and leadership, Indigenous beliefs and knowledges are key domains that form the cultural determinants of health, which are protective factors for health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Lowitja Institute 2020). The health of our people is inextricably linked to the health of Country. Data centres and AI training facilities have significant requirements of land, water and energy use as well as a lasting impact on Country. The impact on Country directly impacts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples health and wellbeing.

Governments must not neglect considerations of health, alongside discussions of land and energy use in the regulation of AI. Australia's approach must go further than simply ensuring access to the benefits of AI. It must ensure that AI does not reproduce or amplify existing racism, bias and inequity within health systems. This requires Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be involved in the governance, design, development, regulation and evaluation of AI, alongside strong protections for Indigenous data sovereignty and governance, transparency and accountability.

The Government has indicated that the new Australia Standards for AI, aim to strengthen existing expectations of data centers and AI infrastructure developers, including bolstering regulation around land and energy use.

We welcome these discussions, however, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, discussions that encompass land and energy use are also discussions of 'health'. The fragmentation of authority and control over land, boundaries, and natural resources continues to have direct impacts on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can manage and protect their health and wellbeing. As the infrastructure needed to support AI expands, the cultural determinants of health must be recognised, centred, and respected.

Meaningful engagement with our peoples involves moving beyond tokenistic consultation and includes establishing foundational structures and systems that integrate Indigenous knowledge systems into the design, governance, and delivery of AI policies and programs.

These concerns are consistent with the findings from Lowitja Institute's recent paper, *Preparedness for Artificial Intelligence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health: workforce policy, perspectives*, which identified persistent gaps In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and decision-making authority across health and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy settings (Lowitja Institute 2026).

Across policies, the paper identified:

- lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and decision-making authority through the design, governance. and oversight of AI systems
- weak accountability mechanisms that undermine effective partnerships with the community controlled sector
- Indigenous Knowledge Systems are not embedded within health policy.

If left unaddressed, these gaps create or lead to unintended consequences, including biased decision-making, exclusion, privacy breaches, inappropriate use of data, reduced trust in health services, and the perpetuation or amplification of existing inequities (Lowitja Institute 2026).

Australia's national AI standards represent an opportunity to learn from previous experiences and establish governance arrangements that are equitable, accountable and future-focused.

Lowitja Institute calls on the Government to:

- embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and shared decision-making authority within the development of national AI standards
- ensure health is recognised as a core pillar of national AI governance
- integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles into AI policy and regulatory frameworks
- establish clear accountability mechanisms to support meaningful partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities
- recognise the connections between AI infrastructure, Country, climate, culture, and health.

AI presents significant opportunities for Australia.

Realising those opportunities will require governance that reflects the strengths, expertise, and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, while ensuring that the benefits of AI are shared equitably and contribute to healthier people, communities, and Country.

References:

Lowitja Institute, 2020, *Culture is Key: Towards cultural determinants-driven health policy,* Lowitja Institute

Lowitja Institute (2026) *Preparedness for Artificial Intelligence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health: workforce policy, perspectives and future directions: A scoping and policy review*. Lowitja Institute. Available at: https://lowitja.org.au/resource/preparedness-for-artificial-intelligence-in-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-health-workforce-policy-perspectives-and-future-directions/ (Accessed: 21 July 2026).

Lowitja Institute (2026). *Preparedness for artificial intelligence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health: Workforce policy, perspectives and future directions: A scoping and policy review*. Lowitja Institute. https://lowitja.org.au/resource/preparedness-for-artificial-intelligence-in-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-health-workforce-policy-perspectives-and-future-directions/