

## Towards Culturally Sensitive Patient Care for Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander People

For many, requiring nursing support from unknown people, in unfamiliar environments often many miles from home, will take people out of their comfort zone. When the patient is from a different cultural background, for example Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander communities, there can be yet another level of vulnerability experienced for those in such situations - both for the patient and the carer!

Over the past decade, the health industry has benefitted from taking an informed and sensitive approach to the care and welfare of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander clients and patients from across a range of health, welfare and care agencies. In shared consultation with First Nations expertise, the health industry has developed and introduced expectations of ethical and professional standards. These encompass cultural inclusivity and safety for program management, staff training, and clinical practice within their particular field of health support. These have been widely applied across health agencies across Australia.

Complementary to this is the emergence of the Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander Health Liaison Officer within many health care organisations. Their role is to provide emotional, social and cultural support to First Nations patients and their families assisting in improving health care services and maintaining positive relationships.

One particularly comprehensive resource on patient care, are a set of guidelines produced by Queensland Health, researched and developed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Capability Team, Queensland. Whilst this particularly references Queensland programs, they are relevant across the wider jurisdictions of Australia. This resource is '*aligned with the core principles of the Australian Safety and Quality Framework for Health Care and the Australian Charter of Healthcare Rights*', [p 2, Queensland Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Patient Care Guideline]. The following is a precis of this document.

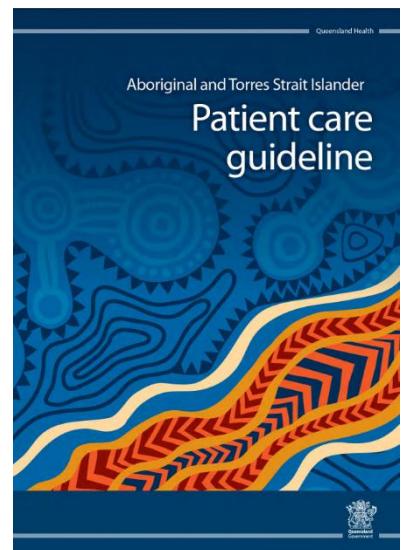
### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Patient Care, Guidelines: Queensland Health

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#### Section 1: Factors influencing access to healthcare [Beginning page 3]

Inherent to the way Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander peoples consider their health and welfare are some significant influences, critical to the provision of culturally sensitive health care. These include:

- **Cultural factors.** Inclusive of the traditional holistic approach to healthcare, the obligations and responsibilities to kinship systems and family, language differences (verbal and non-verbal) and the practice of segregation of Men's and Women's Business.
- **Social and historical factors.** To create a culturally safe environment, requires a sensitive understanding of patients' past experiences including those of family and community. For example, First Nations people may '*relate the sterile hospital environments to past mistreatments*' or they might represent places of dying' [p4],



#### Section 2: Providing culturally capable patient care [Beginning page 5]

There is no 'one size fits all' approach. Integral to the provision of culturally capable patient care is to recognise that Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander peoples come from many diverse cultures. Furthermore it is important for carers' themselves to develop an awareness of how their own 'cultural filters' might impact the way they interpret patient behaviours and language (verbal and non-verbal). Understanding patients through the lens of the following will support improved health care for this investment.

- **Holistic nature** of First Nations peoples' approach to health care and wellbeing.

- **Culturally appropriate communication:** building rapport, use of language, respect for position of the doctor, the role of shame within culture, cultural body language communication
- **Gathering of information:** minimise risks to cultural safety, by ensuring the specificity and accuracy of relevant information
- **Culturally welcoming and inclusive hospital environment**

### **Section 3: Aspects of clinical care [Advice and tips beginning page 11]**

A sensitive and culturally considered approach to the clinical experience for the Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander patient, can do much to contribute to positive health care outcomes for the individual, their family and community. These sensitivities include application to the following:

- **Medical examinations**
- **Diagnosis and treatment:** Including traditional treatment as an option, and aspects on decision-making and informed consent, specific cultural protocols for consent on behalf of children
- **Administration of medication**
- **Pain Management**
- **Patient discharge:** Including discharge against medical advice
- **End of life care:** Cultural practices will vary across all cultural groups and therefore being aware of these relative to the individual is important
- **Follow-up healthcare support,** being mindful of local networks and supports available

Capturing in this space, the complexities of this topic is not possible. However, perhaps interest has been significantly tweaked to raise discussion relevant to your workplace, and to build professional relationships with local Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander health organisations, in your state or territory to build further understanding.

### **References**

- [NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HEALTH PLAN 2013–2023](#), Australian Government  
[Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing \(2013\). National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023. Canberra: Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.](#)  
[Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Patient care Guideline, Queensland Health, 2014](#)  
[https://www.health.qld.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0022/157333/patient\\_care\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0022/157333/patient_care_guidelines.pdf)