Acknowledgements

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The following links are to resources used to develop this document and which provide useful additional information:


http://www.yarrahealing.catholic.edu.au


http://www.abs.gov.au

http://www.creativespirits.info
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture holds a distinct position as the world’s oldest surviving culture, rich in heritage, knowledge, beliefs and traditions. However for over 200 years Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have survived many appalling travesties instigated by colonisation including dispossession from traditional lands, loss of traditional languages, massacres, prejudice, assimilation and forced removal of children from their families. The use of derogative and discriminatory language when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities was one of many ways that European colonists practiced discrimination. Language was used to de-humanise, subordinate, and justify government policies that stripped Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of fundamental human rights. The use of appropriate and culturally informed language is therefore critical to ensuring that service providers are not replicating the subjugation of the past and are demonstrating their commitment to providing a culturally aware and responsive service to the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities.

This document is intended to provide the North West Melbourne Metropolitan Region (NWMM) Primary Care Partnership (PCP) management and staff, and our member agencies, with guidance and understanding regarding the appropriate terminology to use when working with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and their communities, or when developing written information such as submissions or program information. The information contained within this guide is based on literature reviews and consultations with the Aboriginal community. It should be noted however that the use of language is continually evolving and that there may be disparity across different communities and between Aboriginal people as to what is considered acceptable, insensitive or offensive.
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It’s important to understand that Australia has traditionally been inhabited by two distinct groups of Indigenous peoples that are ethnically and culturally very different. While Torres Strait Islander people come from the islands of the Torres Strait, situated between Cape York in Queensland and Papua New Guinea; Aboriginal people are comprised of diverse communities across mainland Australia and Tasmania. Each of these Aboriginal communities has their own name, language and traditions. It is these communities that form the identity of most Aboriginal Australians.

There are approximately 630,000 Aboriginal people and 47,000 Torres Strait Islander people living in Australia. The majority of Torres Strait Islander people live in the north of Queensland, particularly in Townsville and Cairns. In Victoria there is a population of approximately 38,000 Aboriginal people and approximately 3000 Torres Strait Islander people.

Europeans have formally used various terms such as ATSI, Aborigine, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous to describe the diverse groups that inhabited Australia prior to, and post-colonisation. More recently government institutions have preferred use of the term ‘Indigenous’ to encompass both Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. However critics of the term ‘Indigenous’ have expressed that it is inappropriate as it doesn’t recognise the distinction between Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. Furthermore some Aboriginal community members see the term ‘Indigenous’ as associated with the perception that prior to the 1967 Referendum Aboriginal people were treated as native flora and fauna, lacking in entitlement to basic human rights (as Indigenous is a term also used to refer to native plants and animals).

The most appropriate terminology is therefore to refer to ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people’ in full and without abbreviation. Using the term ‘peoples’ (including the letter ‘s’) is also appropriate as it recognises the diversity of Aboriginal nations across Victoria and Australia. Also acceptable is the use of the term ‘First People of Australia’ or ‘First Nations’. These terms are often used politically or strategically as they emphasize that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were the original inhabitants of Australia and here prior to colonisation – a fact yet to be recognised within the Australian Constitution.

Some organisations refer to Aboriginal people and other service users using umbrella terms such as ‘Diversity’. Typically these terms are used to encompass all of the diverse cultural identities to which agencies need to be responsive. Caution should be taken however if referring to Aboriginal people within this grouping as the term ‘Diversity’ supports perceptions of ‘Anglo’ as the dominant culture and all other social identities as ‘other’. For Aboriginal people this perception fails to recognise that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of Australia who have been here for up to 60,000 years. Furthermore this grouping fails to recognise the experience of Aboriginal people, as the colonised original inhabitants of Australia, as unique and not comparable to the experience of any other cultural group residing within Australia.
As a state which has relatively few Torres Strait Islanders residing within, when informally referring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria it is generally acceptable to use the term ‘Aboriginal’ without reference to Torres Strait Islander people. This is in recognition that Aboriginal people were the original inhabitants of Victoria. In written and formal oral communication, the first reference should state ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people’ followed by ‘herein or hereafter referred to as Aboriginal’ or use of a footnote stating the same in written communication. Following this qualification for the rest of the document or presentation the term ‘Aboriginal’ can be used.

In further consideration of the small population of Torres Strait Islanders within Victoria, action research relating to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community will sometimes choose to only use the term ‘Aboriginal’ for ethical purposes. This is because if reference is made in the research findings to Torres Strait Islander people – those persons might be identifiable due to the small size of the population.

There are also a number of other names that Aboriginal people commonly use to identify groups based on geography, including:

- Koori (or Koorie or Goori or Goorie) in New South Wales and Victoria
- Murri in southern Queensland
- Noongar in southern Western Australia
- Nunga in southern South Australia
- Palawah (or Pallawah) in Tasmania
- Anangu in northern South Australia, and neighbouring parts of Western Australia and Northern Territory
- Bama in north-east Queensland

These terms are sometimes preferred by Aboriginal people as they do not have historically negative connotations in comparison to the terms used by Europeans post-colonisation. The term ‘Koori’, however only includes Aboriginal people born in Victoria or Southern NSW and therefore excludes Aboriginal people who were born in other parts of Australia who are now living in Victoria. It is recommended that the term ‘Koori’ is not used without prior consultation with Aboriginal community members.
A ‘nation’ refers to a culturally distinct group of Aboriginal people associated with a particular, culturally defined area of land or country. Each nation has boundaries, and language is tied to that particular area of land and country.

The Kulin Nation is an alliance of five Aboriginal nations in Central Victoria. The collective territory extends around Port Phillip and Western Port, up into the Great Dividing Range and the Loddon and Goulburn River valleys.

Please note that Wurundjeri is now the common term for descendants of all the Woiwurrung clans. Due to a lack of consensus regarding some boundaries between the Nations - when publicly referring to the Traditional Owners/Custodians in Melbourne’s NW MR, best practice is to refer to ‘the people of the Kulin Nations’ as the traditional custodians/owners of the land.
If a person identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, it is offensive to question that identity. Terms such as mixed blood, half caste, full-blood, or part-Aboriginal, should never be used.

The Australian Government provides the following definition to determine if a person is of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent:

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he [or she] lives.

This definition is used when Aboriginal people apply for a Certificate of Aboriginality which is required for eligibility to some Aboriginal specific services. However this definition fails to consider the implications for Aboriginal people who are victims of policies that have forcibly removed Aboriginal children from their families and communities. In these instances it may be difficult to demonstrate a connection to community or acceptance by the community. It is therefore recommended that agencies never question a client’s Aboriginality but accept that person based solely on self-identification.

Most Aboriginal people self-identify according to their traditional clan groups or nations, which are also intrinsically tied to land, language, spiritual beliefs, and cultural obligations. For instance, an Aboriginal woman might refer to herself as a ‘Yorta Yorta’ woman or a ‘Gunai/Kurnai’ woman.

The history of Aboriginal people/children being removed from their families, land and communities means that many Aboriginal people have lost these important cultural connections. Programs or services such as Link Up provide assistance and reunification support to Stolen Generations and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have been fostered, adopted, institutionalized or separated from their families. This is often a complex and sensitive emotional journey and accordingly it is recommended that service providers never ask probing questions to Aboriginal clients about their cultural identity or community connections, unless this information is offered.
Being an Elder is not always defined by age – but rather refers to a community member who has gained recognition within their community as a custodian of knowledge and lore. Recognised Elders are highly respected within Aboriginal communities and have important roles in relation to traditional ceremonies and decision-making. Not showing respect to Elders is one of the biggest mistakes non-Aboriginal people can make when interacting with the Aboriginal community.

When referring to an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Elder in written communication, always use the capital 'E'.

Titles such as 'Aunty' and 'Uncle' are used as marks of respect for Elders in the Aboriginal community. However non-Aboriginal people should not use this term unless you are personally familiar with the particular Elder or have been invited by the person to address them as such or advised by a member of the Aboriginal community. If unsure respectfully ask that person how they would prefer to be addressed or introduced, particularly when that Elder is conducting a traditional welcome at a public event.
When referring to Aboriginal people within Australia

- In verbal and written communication use the term ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people’ in full rather than the term ‘Indigenous’ or ‘ATSI’.

When referring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria

- It is acceptable to use the term ‘Aboriginal’ in informal verbal communication
- In formal communication (for example written documentation or during public forums) use ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people (herein or hereafter referred to as Aboriginal people)’. The term ‘Aboriginal’ can then be used for the remainder of the communication.

Capitalisation

- Always use capital letters when referring to ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander’ people or ‘Aboriginal’ people. Using the terms without capitals refers to aboriginal/indigenous peoples from all over the world, whereas when spelled with a capital they refer specifically to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people within Australia.

Use of Grammar

- Always use ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander’ as an adjective and not a noun. For example, “This article addresses the health status of Aboriginals” should be written as “This article addresses the health status of Aboriginal people”.
- Never refer to Aboriginal people as ‘them’, ‘they’, or ‘those people’ in verbal or written materials as this language is divisive. Alternatively refer to ‘Aboriginal community members’.

Addressing Elders

- Only use ‘Aunty’ or ‘Uncle’ in conversation with an Elder if you are invited to address that person in that way. If in doubt always ask the person how they would prefer to be addressed.

References to Colonisation

- Use the terms ‘pre-contact/post-contact’ or ‘pre-colonisation/post-colonisation’ to describe the period before and after colonisation. Do not use the term ‘pre-settlement or post-settlement’.
Describing Aboriginal communities

- Be aware that traditionally, and currently, Aboriginal cultures were and are many and varied.
- ‘Country’ is a term used to describe a culturally defined area of land associated with a particular, culturally distinct group of people or nation.
- Ensure that the use of the term Australian includes Aboriginal people. For example, the statement: ‘Most Australians continue to see Aboriginal people...’ infers that Aboriginal people are not Australian, which is incorrect. Instead use the following terminology. ‘Most non-Aboriginal Australians continue to see Aboriginal people...’
- ‘Mob’ is a term identifying a group of Aboriginal people associated with a particular place or country. ‘Mob’ is generally used by and between Aboriginal people. Therefore it may not be appropriate for non-Aboriginal people to use this term unless this is known to be acceptable.
- The terms ‘traditional owners’ and ‘traditional custodians’ of the land are often used interchangeably – however the use of term ‘custodians’ reflects a cultural understanding that no one can own the land, but that the Aboriginal people of that land have particular obligations that include protecting and caring for the land.

Formal acknowledgement of traditional owners/custodians

- When acknowledging the Traditional Owners/Custodians for an event based in Melbourne’s North West - refer to the ‘People of the Kulin Nations’.

Note: It is offensive to appropriate Aboriginal cultural symbols, art, and language without consultation and permission from the traditional owners/custodians.

For further information contact:

- Wurundjeri Council - 8673 0901
- Koorie Heritage Trust - 8622 2600