

UNSW School of Population Health

Submission: Indigenous Voice Proposal

23 April 2021

The UNSW School of Population Health fully supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the importance of a First Nations Voice to Parliament to deliver meaningful constitutional recognition and reform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Every day that a First Nations Voice is not enshrined in law is another day reinforcing the systemic-racism, discrimination and legacy of colonisation that pervades the very fabric of Australian society – across our health, social, justice, and economic systems and governments. Every day without a Voice is contributing to the inexcusable inequities that disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

In response to the Indigenous Voice Proposal (National and Local and Regional Proposals), we make the following comments and recommendations:

- **The role of historical, social, cultural, and environmental determinants of health is fundamental the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.** Underpinning the importance of constitutional recognition is the definition of health for Aboriginal people:

“Aboriginal health means not just the physical well-being of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole Community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being thereby bringing about the total well-being of their Community. It is a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life.” ([NACCHO](#))

The burden of disease for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who represent 3 percent of the population, is 2.3 times that of other Australians. Health and wellbeing cannot be achieved for all unless the voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is enshrined in law.

- **First Nations voice addresses health determinants by the very nature of recognition in the Constitution.** As highlighted by renowned social determinants and global health expert, Michael Marmot, health is dependent on the conditions that enable a person to live their life as they would choose, and that health inequities arise from inequalities in society. In the [MJA](#), Marmot says: “If Indigenous Australians do not have the conditions ... that would allow them to live lives that they would choose to live, ill health is an inevitable result.” Voice enables true self-determination, thus enabling health.
- **It is important to determine how the local and regional voice structure proposed differs to the Local Aboriginal Land Councils that are already in place, and how both structures would work together.** The Local and Regional Proposal suggests the new body will not replace existing structures, but this seems like more governance, which may hamper outcomes. The proposal to respond to the diversity that exists across the country is a welcome move allowing communities to build on existing

arrangements that are already working well.

- **There must be representatives of the diverse experiences of Aboriginal people post-colonisation.** We need to hear not only the voices of people who have been fortunate enough to maintain family ties, country and language but also those who were robbed of these. These are all voices that need to be heard. Directly elected roles will likely favour the former group, with strong ties, and may not be the best approach to ensure representativeness.
- **An intergenerational aspect to both local and national groups is critical.** We want to strengthen the next generation as well as gain wisdom from our Elders.
- **Education and educational providers (across all levels) play a crucial role in creating an understanding of the importance of a Voice to Parliament.** This must be guided by First Nations people and their truths.

While the Indigenous Voice co-design process is an important step forward, constitutional recognition is well overdue. How a First Nations Voice to Parliament 'looks' must be guided and shaped by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Government asked for community voices and the Uluru Statement from the Heart came from a properly constituted process allowing community voice to be heard. Now it is time to deliver on this. Specifically:

1. **The Government must honour its election** commitment to a referendum once a model for the Voice has been settled.
2. **Enabling legislation for the Voice** must be passed after a referendum has been held in the next term of Parliament; and
3. **The membership model for the National Voice** must ensure previously unheard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same chance of being selected as established leadership figures.

The health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People is not a matter for politics – it is a basic human right. A First Nations Voice to Parliament is a matter of the heart - of healing, of walking together to create a healthier Australia for generations to come.

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