

# Celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in Australian health promotion

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In this editorial, in parallel with NAIDOC Week 2023, we celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in Australian health promotion efforts. We focus on tangible actions of the *Australian Health Promotion Association* (AHPA<sup>®</sup>) and *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* (HPJA) that have enabled this vision. But first, it is helpful to understand why this is important.

## 2 | THE ULURU STATEMENT FROM THE HEART: TOWARDS A VOICE TO PARLIAMENT AND CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

In May 2017, after an extensive democratic nationwide consultation process involving a series of 13 Regional Dialogues, more than 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates attended the National Constitutional Convention at Uluru, Northern Territory.<sup>1,2</sup> A historic statement was developed during this meeting, known as the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.<sup>3</sup> It called for ‘the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution’ followed by agreement-making and truth-telling.<sup>1</sup> This proposal is referred to as Voice, Treaty, Truth.<sup>1–3</sup> However, then Liberal Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, rejected the call for a Voice to Parliament.<sup>1</sup> This decision was unpalatable to many. A Joint Select Committee of Parliament was subsequently established, finding that ‘the Voice’ was the only viable recognition proposal and recommending that the government initiate a process of co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>1</sup> The current Labour Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, has since announced a referendum to give Australians the right to vote on the Voice to Parliament through constitutional change. The proposed question scheduled to be asked in the latter half of 2023 will be: ‘A Proposed Law: to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. Do you approve this proposed alteration?’.<sup>4</sup> Further detail on the Uluru Statement and the subsequent referendum journey has been written by key champions of the Voice including Pat Anderson AO, Megan Davis and Thomas Mayo(r).<sup>1,2</sup> These texts carefully engage with intertwining concepts relating to history, law, human rights and social justice issues. They provide important messages for all Australians.

While there has been much debate about the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, and more notably the referendum and proposed Voice to Parliament, there has also been considerable academic, industry

and public support. Indeed, those involved in the ‘Yes’ campaign have consistently provided robust evidence about why a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament is critical.<sup>1,2</sup> Concepts relating to sovereignty, empowerment and self-determination are frequently cited.<sup>1,2</sup> These concepts align particularly well with health promotion values of equity, justice and fairness; and the International Union for Health Promotion and Education (IUHPE) ethical values, which underpin international core health promotion competencies.<sup>5</sup> The three major strategies of the Ottawa Charter—advocate, enable and mediate—are also central as we edge closer to the referendum.

Not surprisingly, AHPA<sup>®</sup> has recently released a statement of support for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament, in addition to being a signatory to the Allies for Uluru Coalition. Its recent statement reads:

AHPA acknowledges the ongoing strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in sustaining the world's oldest living cultures. Social, cultural and historical determinants of health influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander conceptions of health and wellbeing, including a strong connection to Country and collective identity. Core to its vision, AHPA is committed to overcoming inequities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that affect their health and social outcomes...We support the full implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution and the establishment of a Makarrata Commission for the purpose of treaty making and truth-telling. [Australian Health Promotion,<sup>6</sup> p. 1]

This statement demonstrates AHPA's<sup>®</sup> strong support for a ‘Yes’ vote in the upcoming referendum, as a logical means to promote self-determination among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We trust AHPA members and HPJA readers will make a similar choice in the coming months.

In addition to supporting a Voice to Parliament, AHPA<sup>®</sup> and the HPJA Editorial Team recognise there are other practical ways to showcase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholarship in health promotion. For example, AHPA<sup>®</sup> has shown its commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and well-being through its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committee—a standing committee of the

Board—which is working towards a harmonised national Reconciliation Action Plan and the management of a 30-year collaborative health promotion traineeship program that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to work in Health Promotion. Similarly, the HPJA has invested in multiple strategies to prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in its governance structures and journal content, as outlined further below.

### 3 | EMBRACING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER VOICES THROUGH THE HEALTH PROMOTION JOURNAL OF AUSTRALIA

The goal of the HPJA is to publish articles about educational, cultural, organisational, economic and/or environmental approaches that address health promotion issues, advance the health promotion profession and support positive system changes that benefit population health. In particular, articles that address social, cultural and ecological determinants of health and/or issues relating to the promotion of health equity are always warmly welcomed. This includes articles relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and well-being. Indeed, this extends to all scholarship on the topic of Indigenous health and well-being more broadly, noting we also regularly publish articles from Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.

Over the past 5 years, the HPJA has published more than 70 articles relating to Indigenous health and well-being, the majority relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. While most have been led or co-authored by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and practitioners, we acknowledge that this has not always been the case. We are committed to ensuring that 100 per cent of articles about Indigenous health promotion include the voice of Indigenous peoples. This has increased the evidence to inform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health promotion efforts in Australia, particularly evidence aimed at addressing social and cultural determinants of health. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people deem such data and evidence as critical for improving their health and well-being on their own terms.<sup>7-9</sup> This is also recommended as best practice by peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations such as the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Lowitja Institute and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.<sup>7-10</sup>

From a systemic and structural perspective, at least 30% of the Editorial Team are now Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander scholars, notably all women. In turn, and by drawing on their extensive global Indigenous networks, this has increased the pool of Indigenous reviewers contributing to the assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health promotion scholarship, as well as broader health promotion scholarship, in our region. Importantly, it has shifted decision-making towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander control at both reviewer and editorial levels. This has meant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had greater decision-making authority over what is considered quality health promotion scholarship. This has been an important advancement for Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander health promotion in Australia, and one that warrants sustained investment.

Notably, the Ray James Memorial Award, which recognises excellence and innovation in health promotion scholarship published in the HPJA, has been awarded to teams that have included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors in 2019,<sup>11</sup> 2021<sup>12</sup> and 2022.<sup>13</sup> Some of these publications have been our journal's most highly downloaded and cited publications, indicating the quality of such work. In addition, the HPJA scholarship has also been featured prominently as part of Wiley's NAIDOC Week Collection over the past few years.

The abovementioned achievements have not been accidental. They reflect an intentional strategy to recognise the sovereign rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and foreground the centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health promotion evidence in the ways that we think about and take action on health and social inequities. In the spirit of NAIDOC Week 2023, the HPJA Editorial Team has decided to showcase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices by curating a Virtual Issue of the HPJA, including two articles that explicitly align with the 2023 NAIDOC Week theme 'For Our Elders'. The Virtual Issue presents selected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health promotion scholarship, which rightfully privileges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander narratives, and articles that are led or co-authored by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In reading this Editorial and Virtual Issue, we encourage you to reflect on the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in health promotion action and the critical role of a Voice to Parliament to advance health and well-being in Australia.

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