

# Recognising and Enhancing the Role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers in General Practice

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Partnerships between doctors and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers can enhance the delivery of appropriate and effective care to Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers can assist doctors through cultural brokerage, enhancing the meaning and understanding of communication with clients, and the provision of clinical and administrative services. Whilst a number of General Practitioners (GPs) provide primary health care services to Indigenous Australians, very few employ Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander health workers.

Several Australian Government initiatives have the potential to increase the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers in general practice. The Enhanced Primary Care (EPC) Allied Health Initiative enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers to generate income for a general practice. The Practice Incentives Program (PIP) provides a range of incentives to practices including one which supports the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers. These programs, along with EPC items for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Adult Health Checks, Health Assessments, Care Planning and Case Conferencing, and the More Allied Health Services program encourage GPs to address Indigenous health in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers.

## **The role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers in general practice**

The role an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Health Worker can play in private practice is potentially very broad. Their duties may include enhancing the amount and quality of clinical services provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, facilitating communication with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, and practice administration and management.

A visit to a GP can cause anxiety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Differences in language and culture can easily lead to lack of understanding, misinterpretation and frustration on both sides. This increases the risk of poor diagnosis and lack of compliance with treatment regimes. In the worst-case scenario communication barriers can result in adverse outcomes for the client.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers play a pivotal role in reducing anxiety and improving the quality of

communication for Indigenous Australian clients through cultural brokerage. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers can assist GPs to better understand and respond to clients' concerns, and clients to better understand the illness and its treatment. This is likely to result in more appropriate treatment regimes, improved compliance, and better outcomes for the client.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers can assist GPs with client assessments and the provision of clinical treatment. They can also provide services such as screening for chronic diseases, education and health promotion. In the Northern Territory, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers are professionally registered under an Act of the Northern Territory Parliament, they follow protocols to diagnose and prescribe medications for a wide range of common illnesses.

## **Australian Government Initiatives**

General practices are usually small private businesses that provide primary health care services to the community. Like any small business, a general practice needs to make money to survive. They primarily earn money from government rebates such as Medicare and from cash payments from clients. The money earned is spent on wages, indemnity insurance, rent and medical equipment.

The Enhanced Primary Care Allied Health Initiative enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers to generate income for a general practice. This program, along with EPC items for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Adult Health Checks, the Practice Incentives Program and the More Allied Health Services program encourage GPs to address Indigenous health in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers.

## **Enhanced Primary Care**

The Enhanced Primary Care (EPC) Medicare items aim to promote preventive care for older Australians and to improve care coordination for people with chronic conditions and complex care needs. The Department of Health and Ageing has prepared an information kit for workers involved in Indigenous health, explaining the EPC services and how they work.

EPC offers rebates to GPs who provide voluntary health assessments for older Australians and Indigenous Australians 55 years and over. An EPC voluntary health assessment is an in-depth look at a person's physical, social and mental health and wellbeing in daily life. The assessment can either be in the clinic or at the person's home (the rebate is increased for assessments in the person's home). Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health workers can provide valuable assistance in conducting assessments and can work with GPs to improve the patient's health and quality of life.

EPC also offers Medicare rebates for GPs to work with other health care providers to provide coordinated care for clients with chronic medical conditions and complex care needs. An EPC care plan is a long-term plan and is developed and managed by a team including the client's doctor and at least two care providers, which can include an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Health Worker. For example, a client who has diabetes and kidney disease may have complications related to these diseases which need to be managed with the assistance of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and other members of a health care team.

#### **Medicare allied health and dental care items**

Medicare allied health and dental care items enable GPs to refer clients on an EPC multidisciplinary care plan to dentists and certain allied health care professionals, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers for up to five rebatable allied health and three rebatable dental services a year. Allied health professionals and dentists must be registered with the Health Insurance Commission (HIC) to provide these services.

#### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Adult Health Check**

Since 1 May 2004 the Medicare Benefits Schedule includes a two-yearly health check for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged between 15 and 54 (inclusive).

The health check includes taking the client's medical history, examining the client, making or arranging any required investigations, assessing the client's health, undertaking any necessary interventions or referrals and documenting a straightforward strategy for good health.

The client's doctor must see the client as part of the health check but in some circumstances parts of the check are able to be carried out by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander health worker, nurse or other health professional under the supervision of a doctor.

### **The Practice Incentives Program**

The PIP provides a number of incentives aimed at supporting general practices to improve the quality of care provided to clients. PIP incentives target a number of specific areas including information management/information technology, after hours care, teaching, quality prescribing, practice nurses, chronic disease management and rural practices. Practices must be accredited or working towards accreditation against

the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners Standards for General Practices (2nd edition) to participate in the program. A copy of these Standards can be purchased from the RACGP.

One of the PIP incentives is a payment to practices that employ a practice nurse or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker. This is available to all Aboriginal Medical Services participating in PIP and other PIP practices in rural and remote areas and urban areas of workforce shortage. The minimum qualification level of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander health worker is a Certificate Level III or above in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health from a recognised training institute. A comprehensive list of approved courses and guidelines for employing an Aboriginal Health Worker can be obtained from the Health Insurance Commission PIP enquiry line on 1800 222 032.

### **More Allied Health Services**

The aim of the More Allied Health Services (MAHS) Program is to improve the health of people living in rural areas through allied health care and local linkages between allied health care and general practice.

Around 172 full time equivalent (FTE) allied health professionals were funded through the MAHS Program from July 2002 to June 2003. Professionals funded through the program include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers, psychologists, dietitians, podiatrists, social workers and other allied health professionals.

The objectives of MAHS are to:

- Improve the health care of key groups within a rural community through the provision of efficient and effective allied health services which have been selected on the basis of the identified needs of the community;
- Provide additional (in quantity and range) professional allied health services to rural communities; and
- Facilitate an integrated approach to health care provision by allied health care professionals and general practitioners working together to meet the care needs of clients, and by linking the MAHS Program with other State/Australian Government funded health initiatives and services.

### **Conclusion**

With their clinical and cultural brokerage skills, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers can make a valuable contribution to addressing Indigenous health through general practice. The Australian Government programs discussed in this article can help to formalise the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers and GPs. In doing so, they have the potential to increase the recognition of the role and value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers and expand their employment opportunities.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

### Enhanced Primary Care

An information kit regarding Enhanced Primary Care (EPC), including a guide for workers involved in Indigenous health, is available from the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing at

[epc.items@health.gov.au](mailto:epc.items@health.gov.au) or contact **(02) 6289 8651**

Further information about EPC is available:

- At the EPC Website at [www.health.gov.au/epc](http://www.health.gov.au/epc);
- In the Medicare Benefits Schedule Book;
- At The Medical Enquiry line on **13 20 11** for the cost of a local call; or
- Through the Health Insurance Commission, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Access equity line on **1800 556 955**.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Adult Health Check

Further information on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Adult Health Check is available at:

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/publishing.nsf/Content/health-epc-atsiinfo.htm>

### Practice Incentives Program

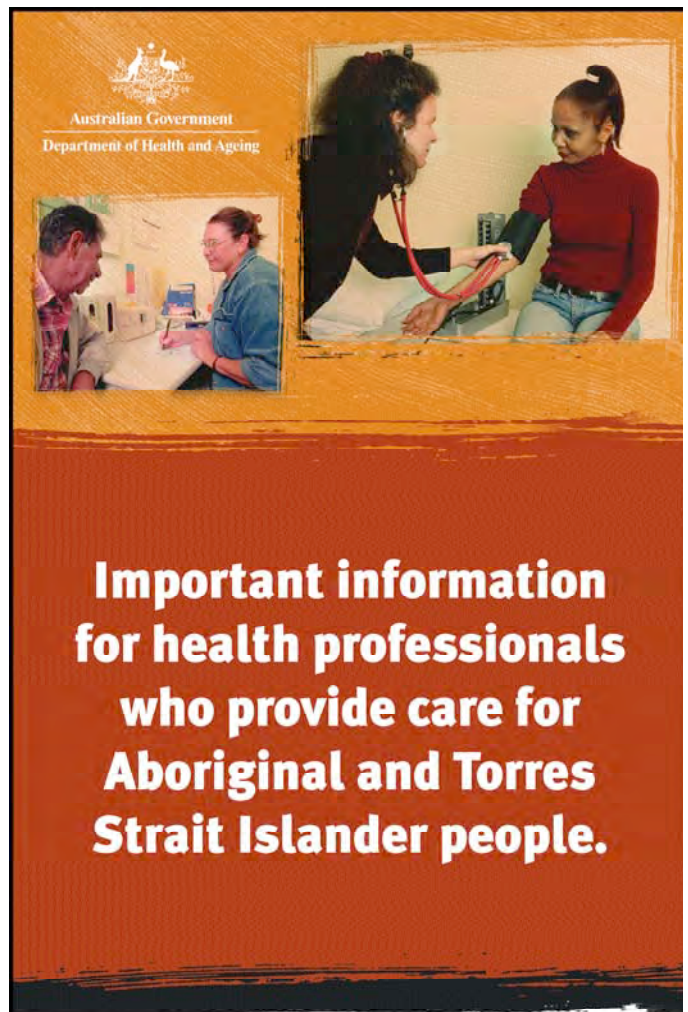
An outline of the Practice Incentives Program is available at [www.hic.gov.au/pip/](http://www.hic.gov.au/pip/)

For further information call the PIP enquiry line on **1800 222 032**

GP accreditation is available through two organisations: Australian General Practice Accreditation Ltd (AGPAL) enquiries number: **1300 362 111**; or Quality Assurance Services (QAS) via the General Practice Accreditation Plus (GPA Plus) Program enquiries number: **1800 188 088**.

### More Allied Health Services

Further information regarding the More Allied Health Services (MAHS) program, including the guidelines, can be found at <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/publishing.nsf/Content/ruralhealth-services-mahs.htm> or phone the rural health inquiry line on **1800 020 787** or e-mail [ruralhealth@health.gov.au](mailto:ruralhealth@health.gov.au) Local Rural Divisions of General Practice who are implementing MAHS projects are also a useful source of information.



**Important information for health professionals who provide care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.**

**A new GP service is available on the Medicare Benefits Schedule.**

A two-yearly Adult Health Check is available for self-identifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15-54 years.

The new service includes taking a patient history, undertaking or organising any investigations, assessing the patient, initiating interventions and developing a strategy for good health. The Medicare fee for Item 710 is \$191.65.

**For more information about the item, visit [www.health.gov.au/epc/atsiinfo.htm](http://www.health.gov.au/epc/atsiinfo.htm)**

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