

Austin Health Celebrates Collaboration with Aboriginal People during NAIDOC Week in 2006

Austin Health is one of Victoria's largest health care providers. It is a 950-bed major teaching and research hospital affiliated with the University of Melbourne. Austin Health employs more than 6,500 staff over three sites (the Repatriation Hospital, the Royal Talbot, and the Austin Hospital), and is renowned for providing high quality, comprehensive public health services. These services are provided to a significant number of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI)¹ population. Throughout Australia, Aboriginal people are dying at almost three times the rate of other Australians and have a life expectancy 17 years lower than the rest of the population. All State-funded hospitals are required to give special attention to the needs of ATSI people by ensuring services are provided in a culturally appropriate way and meet the needs of ATSI people.

Austin Health had more than 1,000 ATSI people present to Emergency, Inpatient and Outpatient areas during 2005, and is committed to ensuring its services meet the needs of ATSI people through the development of its Ngarra Jarra Aboriginal Health Program. There is no quick remedy to the complex issues surrounding Aboriginal health in Australia; however, through the Ngarra Jarra program Austin Health is implementing cultural safety frameworks within the hospital setting and providing culturally responsive services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Working within the Department of Human Services' Improving Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Patients Program (ICAP), Austin Health is committed to continuous improvement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients. Under the Ngarra Jarra program staff have ongoing cultural training and education. Presentations by ATSI people continue to increase and partnerships are forged in an effort to assure quality services that meet the needs of the Aboriginal community.

During NAIDOC Week (3-9 July, 2006), Austin Health signed a collaboration agreement with six other health and social welfare organisations pledging to work together to achieve improved health and social outcomes for Aboriginal people. Joining Austin Health in the agreement were the Commonwealth Care Respite Centre, North East Valley Division of General Practice, Whitehorse Division of General Practice, Wesley Mission, Moreland Community Health Service and Waldreass Village. Signing the collaboration agreement is a positive step in aligning health services for Aboriginal people from acute services to the community because partnerships are needed to move away from episodic care to whole-of-person care structured over time and across many services. By integrating services, it is hoped that the needs of all Aboriginal people will be met by having clearly defined roles and relationships, sharing guidelines, policy and accountability for Aboriginal consumers.

The theme of NAIDOC Week in 2006 was "Respect the Past – Believe in the Future". To celebrate this theme and acknowledge the partnership with co-tenant Mercy Hospital for Women, an Aboriginal artwork was commissioned with the title "Tracking Together for Aboriginal Health". Handprints from representatives of both hospitals were laid on the painting before it was hung in both hospitals.

One of the services included in the Ngarra Jarra Aboriginal Health Program is that provided by the recently-appointed Aboriginal Patient and Peer Support Officer, Aunty Shirley Firebrace. Aunty Shirley plays a special role within Austin Health. As Aboriginal Patient and Peer Support Officer, she is informed of an Aboriginal person's admission either by Austin staff, the person's family, a community organisation, or by the specific Aboriginal Medtrack reporting system that operates across all campuses of Austin Health. Aunty Shirley assists with emotional support and advocacy for inpatients and their families and advises Austin staff about culturally sensitive care. She may also be

involved in discharge planning at the person's request. A strong component of Auntie Shirley's role is to facilitate the Austin Health Ngarra Jarra Aboriginal Elders and Family Support Circle with a strong focus on involving long-term patients and their families with support from peers and Elders.

The Ngarra Jarra Aboriginal Health program has become one of Austin's more visible and respected programs and has created a particular connection for the Aboriginal community. Austin Health has a strong commitment to the Aboriginal Cultural Safety agenda; it has adopted a specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Access and Inclusion policy and has identified in its 2005-2008 Strategic Plan the priority of Aboriginal health. Included are a number of cultural relevance projects such as flying the Aboriginal flag, Aboriginal murals, artworks and a specific meeting place.

It is hoped that the culturally sensitive health services adopted by Austin Health may serve as a model for other hospitals and health service organisations throughout Australia. Hospitals, in particular, are ideally placed to play a lead role in the implementation of cultural safety frameworks for services aiming to meet the needs of Aboriginal people.

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¹ ATSI is a term commonly used by some sections of the community but not recognised by others.