The central concept of empowerment in Indigenous health and wellbeing

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While difficult to define and undoubtedly more difficult to ensure, empowerment is a concept that is central to closing the gap in Indigenous health and wellbeing. The unresolved anger and loss associated with the targeted discrimination, dispossession of land, forcible separation of families and systematic disempowerment of Indigenous people in Australia’s colonial history has had unequivocal effects on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and continues to have intergenerational effects (Brock 1993; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015).

While various definitions exist, empowerment is broadly considered to be the capacity of individuals and communities to make their own choices and decide the direction of their lives (Maynard et al. 2012). Zimmerman (2000) makes the valid argument that empowerment at a family, community and organisational level is more than just the sum of the empowered individuals. Empowerment in these broader contexts is influenced by the interpersonal relationships between individuals, improved social cohesion and the collaborative power of a group of individuals united to advocate for themselves as a people. Community-based empowerment programs have demonstrated a correlation with improved workforce retention, concern for others, reduced violence and improved health and interpersonal communication (Fulford and Enz 1995; Haswell et al. 2010).

Facilitating empowerment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities requires a sustainable way of delivering it at the individual, family and community level, in which leadership ultimately comes from Indigenous people. Swan and Raphael (1995) outlined nine guiding principles for the social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous people that were developed during the Ways Forward national consultation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health. This was the first initiative to specifically address the issue of social and emotional wellbeing, which had previously been neglected in national policy. Notably, it recognised the right to self-determination as key to both historical and contemporary concepts of Indigenous wellbeing. The 1960s and 1970s were witness to significant moments in the fight for Indigenous

right and empowerment, including the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy outside Parliament House in Canberra, the creation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags and the beginning of land rights legislation and civil rights movements (Carson et al. 2007). While as a society we have undoubtedly progressed from the discriminative policies of the past, the shift in government policy to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as people that have legitimate rights does not equate with empowerment. Although unpalatable to acknowledge, contemporary racism remains a barrier to Indigenous empowerment.

In his seminal presentation at the Australian Psychological Society Annual Conference (Perth, Western Australia) in 1995, Indigenous leader, Rob Riley, described the welfare system as an inadequate solution to the socioeconomic disadvantage in Indigenous communities, leading to ‘co-dependency’ between the community and government and labelling it ‘administrative genocide’ (Dudgeon et al. 2015). He argued that it does not empower Indigenous people to make their own choices and decide their life course. Affirmative action policies create an illusion of empowerment without tackling the key historical and cultural barriers to Indigenous health and wellbeing. Although such initiatives may aspire to empower Indigenous people, when imposed by non-Indigenous Australians, they also impose a version of what is good and right, conflicting with notions of autonomy that are inherent to facilitating empowerment. Despite significant government investment into improving the health and wellbeing of Indigenous people, many of the Closing the Gap interventions have been unsuccessful due to their failure to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on individual and community levels.

The socioeconomic disadvantage, gaps in health and literacy and poorer living and working conditions are often spouted in the media, without an understanding of the key social, cultural and emotional factors at play. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a strong sense of spirituality, cultural tradition and kinship, community values, connection to and understanding of the natural environment, and an extraordinary political strength, all of which are a testament to
their resilience as a community in spite of the hardships they have endured. Moving forwards from Australia’s colonial past requires more than just economic resources and affirmative action policies, rather, it requires a dedication to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to enable the realisation of self-determination in relation to health and wellbeing.

Conflicts of interest
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References