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The enormous disparities in social and emotional and mental health outcomes and an apparent worsening of the circumstances of many indigenous communities were two of the major reasons that prompted Indigenous psychologists from all over the country to organize to form Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA) in 2008, under the auspices of the Australian Psychological Society. AIPA has the dual aims of increasing the number of Indigenous psychologists and addressing the widening gap in social and emotional wellbeing and mental health outcomes for Indigenous people.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2004-05 showed that just over one quarter (27%) of Indigenous adults reported high or very high levels of psychological distress. This ratio was similar to that in New York City eight months after the attack on the World Trade Centre (Stewart & Delaney, 2006). Regardless of the cause(s), those who find themselves psychologically overwhelmed or struggling to cope suffer high levels of psychological distress. Such distress is a clear global indicator of poor social and emotional wellbeing among Indigenous Australians, and needs to be addressed early to prevent an increasingly high burden of mental illness among Indigenous peoples.

The integration of culturally appropriate social and emotional wellbeing and primary mental health care services into Aboriginal community-controlled health care settings is essential in addressing the high levels of psychological distress among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There is evidence that Indigenous peoples do not have universal access to these services, which should be available to all Indigenous populations in urban, regional or remote Australia.

Preventing psychological distress is likely to result in a range of beneficial *health* as well as *mental health* outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and could make a major contribution to closing the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and other Australians.

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References

Stewart G. and Delaney, P (2006). An Overview of the Social and Emotional Wellbeing data in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2004 – 05. *Presentation to the National Aboriginal Community Health Controlled Organisation*. Retrieved 26.1.09 from http://www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous/seww06/presentations/session_7_naccho_report_gavin_stewart.pdf