



**Submission presented to the Honourable Warren Snowdon, Minister for Indigenous Health, Rural and Regional Health and Regional Services Delivery by AIPA Steering Committee member Graham Gee at Parliament House October 2009.**

**Purpose: To advocate for a national gathering to evaluate the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People’s Mental Health and Social and Emotional Well Being 2004-2009, and to commence discussions towards developing the next Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing and mental health plan.**

**Background**

The following major national conferences, inquiries and reports raised issues about the nature and quality of mental health services provided to Indigenous people:

1992	The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Report
1993	National Aboriginal Mental Health Conference
1994	The Burdekin Report on Human Rights and Mental Illness
1994-95	Extensive national consultations for the Ways Forward report
1995	National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families
1995	The Ways Forward Report: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health Policy: National Consultancy Report.
1997	Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families

There was a high level of consensus in the findings of these reports and enquiries that many mental health professionals had little understanding of Indigenous history,

culture and society and this had resulted in frequent misdiagnosis and inappropriate treatment. All reported a high level of unmet need and that Indigenous people perceived mainstream mental health services to be failing them. All advocated more holistic approaches that took into account the widespread grief, loss and trauma associated with colonisation, the aftermath of widespread removal of children and on-going disadvantage - rather than the provision of clinical mental health services which emphasised *individual* mental health and had connotations of individual pathology.

### **Policy Responses to Address Indigenous Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health**

The first national initiative to recognise and address Indigenous emotional and social wellbeing was the Emotional and Social Wellbeing (Mental Health) Action Plan 1996-1997 and 1999-2000 developed by the Australian Government's Office of Torres Strait Islander Health Services (now OATSIH). The Action Plan provided \$20 million to Indigenous organisations to develop social and emotional wellbeing and mental health models that were holistic in their approach.

Many projects were innovative, culturally appropriate and have proved to be sustainable. Many of the SEWB and mental health programs referred to as 'promising practices' today were established or developed under this Action Plan. These services were supplemented by Bringing Home Counsellors and additional Link-up services provided in response to the Bringing Them Home Report (1997). Today, Indigenous-specific SEWB services administered by OATISH include:

- Mental Health Service Delivery program: 19 service delivery projects located across Australia: seven in Victoria, four in Queensland, four in New South Wales, two in Western Australia, and two in South Australia;
- The Link-up program: 11 Link Up services are funded to provide family tracing and reunion services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- Bringing Them Home Counselors' program: Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services employ counselors to provide counseling services to those removed from their families;
- Social and Emotional Well Being Regional Centres: 12 Regional Centers provide training, support and planning assistance for Aboriginal Mental

Health Workers and specialist social and emotional wellbeing counsellors,  
including BTH Counselors and Link Up workers;

The Emotional and Social Wellbeing (Mental Health) Action Plan 1996-1997 1999-2000 helped to consolidate and bring forward the concept and importance of social and emotional wellbeing in relation to Indigenous people and represented a significant first move into an area that had received little attention from government in the past.

An independent evaluation (Urbis Keys Young, 2001) found the Action Plan to be timely and to have reflected the vision of the Ways Forward Report. However, it was noted that: the Plan only partially implemented policy elements of Ways Forward; may have been overly ambitious in its scope; and that it had had little influence on State and Territory mental health services and the services they provided to Indigenous people. It was suggested that the Action Plan be revised and developed into a strategic document which set out a conceptual framework, identified appropriate roles and planning mechanisms and identified core areas for action in the State, Territory and Commonwealth sectors. Essentially this set the framework for the development of the *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2004-2009*.

### **National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2004 - 2009**

The SEWB Framework was prepared by the Social Health Reference Group for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Council and National Mental Health Working Group.

The SEWB Framework was the next successive plan to build upon Ways Forward and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Emotional and Social Wellbeing (Mental Health) Action Plan (1996 – 2000). The SEWB Framework was designed to complement the National Mental Health Plan and the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (NSFATSIH 2003-2013).

Part one of the SEWB Framework sets out the guiding principles. Part two sets out Strategic Directions in 5 Key areas:

1. Focus on children, young people families and communities
2. Strengthen Aboriginal community controlled health services
3. Improved access and responsiveness of mental health care

4. Coordination of resources, programs, initiatives and planning
5. Improve quality, data and research

The SEWB Framework aimed to involve a broad cross-section of relevant organisations and individuals on a national, state/territory and local/regional level using a three-layer process for implementation. Implementation has been designed to be consistent with the implementation process developed for the *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health 2003-2013 (NSFATSIH)*, and to link with the implementation processes for the *National Mental Health Plan 2003-2008*.

The SEWB Framework advocated a partnership approach involving three layers of implementation:

i) National

On a national level this includes agencies such as:

- Related government agencies and national committees in health, community services, justice, police and education portfolios.
- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Council.
- Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC).
- National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO).

ii) State/ Territory

On a State/Territory level, this includes:

- Framework Agreement Partners.
- Departments of health, family and community services, justice, police, education and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs.
- NACCHO affiliates.

iii) Local/regional

On a local/regional level this includes:

- Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHs).
- Schools.
- Local communities, individuals and families including elders.
- General Practitioners.
- Aboriginal Health Workers.
- Aboriginal Child Care Agencies.
- Other service providers in childcare, education and health.
- Child and youth mental health services.
- Recreational organisations.

Strategies with clear roles and responsibilities have been developed to oversight the implementation of the SEWB Framework at each of the three levels. *The Framework was due to be evaluated by December 2009.*

### **Monitoring and Reporting: Australian Government Implementation Plan 2007-2013**

Key Result Area Four of the Australian Government Implementation Plan 2007-2013 which was developed against the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, relates to social and emotional wellbeing. Reporting occurs through qualitative reporting against the Implementation Plan and quantitative reporting through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework.

### **Close the Gap Targets**

In the Close the Gap National Indigenous Health Equality Targets (2008), Indigenous mental health comes under Targets 2.3, mental health and emotional and social wellbeing. The overall goal is to improve the mental health and SWEB of Indigenous Australians to the same standards enjoyed by the majority of the Australian population and reduce the impact of mental disorders on patients and their families. Targets within this goal include:

- Reduce the impact of loss, grief and trauma on mental health across the life span.
- Reduce the disparity in suicide rates and mental health disorders including depression and psychosis across the life span and improve mental health outcomes and reduce adverse events for Indigenous patients including Indigenous people with chronic disease, substance abuse or in custody.

A range of processes is proposed to achieve these targets. Importantly, one is to Implement a National Policy Framework for Indigenous Mental Health (p. 28).

### **The 4<sup>th</sup> National Mental Health Plan**

The Fourth National Mental Health Plan has identified the need to 'lead the

development of coordinated actions to implement a renewed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Well Being Framework' as a key strategy to Priority Area 1: Social Inclusion and Recovery:

*'The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Well Being 2004–2009 (the Framework) was developed to respond to the high rates of social and emotional wellbeing problems and mental illness experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people and communities. The Framework was designed to complement the National Mental Health Plan and the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (2003–2013). It was endorsed by the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council in 2004. The Framework emphasised a number of important areas for shared action and initiatives. These remain relevant but need to be re-visited and implemented in the new environment of joint government effort.*

*This work will need to take into account other recent developments through COAG and other sectors relevant to a social and emotional wellbeing approach. Most importantly, Australia is undertaking a comprehensive approach to 'Closing the Gap' of Indigenous disadvantage in health. It is imperative that these efforts prioritise mental health, social wellbeing and emotional wellbeing, as this is critical to all efforts that aim to give Indigenous Australians the same health status as other Australians (2009, p29).*

## **Conclusion**

Currently there is a lack of an Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing and mental health plan at a national level. It is essential that a plan be developed in genuine partnership with Indigenous representatives. AIPA has consulted with Professor Helen Milroy, Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist about the need to review the SEWB Framework. The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2004-2009 serves as an exemplary model that could be renewed. However, to ensure appropriate partnerships, a gathering or conference should be convened to take stock of the current situation or national and state levels and to discuss how to proceed with developing a new shared plan.

## **Recommendation**

It is recommended that the Office of the Minister for Indigenous Health, Rural and Regional Health and Regional Services organise a gathering of key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Social and Emotional Well Being stakeholders and experts and the appropriate national and state government representatives. The aim of the gathering would be to review the existing SEWB Framework and to commence discussions towards developing the next Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing and mental health plan.

Stakeholders should include:

- The National Indigenous Health and Equity Council (NIHEC)
- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation
- National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and state affiliates
- The Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association
- The Australian Indigenous Doctors Association
- The Council for Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Nurses
- The National Australian Mental Health Council
- Government Stakeholders such as OATSIH and FaHCSIA

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