New framework lays the foundation for Indigenous mental health reforms

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) welcomed this week’s launch of the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing on World Mental Health Day as a tangible way to address mental health issues among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The Framework builds upon the 2004 Framework and offers a new path forward for government departments, primary health networks, peak bodies and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health organisations in implementing important Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health reforms.

Michael Moore, CEO of the PHAA expressed strong support for the launch, saying “It’s very promising to see this initiative addressing the high incidence of mental ill-health in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It’s also highly positive that the reforms which it sets out can be led primarily by Indigenous community health organisations, which are best placed to effectively deliver mental health programs at the local level”.

Mr Moore continued, “The Framework has adopted a comprehensive approach to Indigenous mental health through promoting social and emotional well-being, and valuing community and culture - all intrinsic components of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life. Mental health is often intimately linked to one’s sense of belonging and identity, and the Framework does well to acknowledge this aspect”.

“The first priority is to ensure adequate funding and capacity-building for carrying out the Framework under Indigenous health leadership, which should closely correspond with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan. The Framework should also serve as a starting point for delivering the Indigenous component of the Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan,” Mr Moore said.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are twice as likely to die from suicide than non-Indigenous Australians overall, with young Indigenous Australian males four times as likely to suicide.

Mr Moore said, “A key element of the Close the Gap agenda is increasing Indigenous Australian life expectancy, and we need to address their high suicide rate in order to do this. Maintaining a focus on mental health issues in these communities will also serve as a protective mechanism against other health inequalities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which will further enhance their life expectancy”.

“Primary health networks and government health agencies do need to be held accountable for delivering better Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health outcomes and funding, and the Framework helps to give these bodies a clear picture of what reforms are needed and how they should be implemented,” Mr Moore concluded.

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