

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their infants experience disproportionate and poorer health outcomes, with a greater burden of disease, unacceptably high mortality rates, and a shorter life expectancy compared to their non-indigenous counterparts.¹ This is, in part, due to the historical legacy of colonisation and subsequent dispossession. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants are overrepresented in rates of preterm birth and low birthweight, and in the subsequent requirement for neonatal healthcare in Australia, which are key risk factors for infant mortality.² The mortality rate for indigenous infants is almost twice that for infants of non-Indigenous families at 5.1 per 1,000 live births compared to 2.9 for non-indigenous infants.³

Over the period of 2017 to 2021 the main cause of indigenous infant deaths were perinatal conditions (49%) such as birth trauma, foetal growth disorders, complications of pregnancy, respiratory and cardiovascular disorders.¹ This also includes sudden unexpected deaths in infancy and sudden infant death syndrome. Historical, political, and socioeconomic disadvantages are major contributors to the increased negative health and social outcomes for these infants into adulthood.²

Contributing factors

Life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is significantly lower than that of non-Indigenous Australians, and hospitalisation rates are higher.² Historical, political, and social determinants have each played a role in the health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Some of these contributing factors to health inequality are:

- unequal access to primary healthcare and infrastructure
- poor nutrition and living conditions
- lack of culturally safe and culturally respectful health services and health education
- human rights and social justice inequities including the effects of racism
- insufficient or poorly targeted funding to meet health care needs
- poor access to secure and meaningful work^{2,4}

ACNN's position

As the peak professional body for neonatal nurses in Australia, ACNN recognises the need to address the unacceptable health disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants and non-Indigenous infants. This position statement is designed to guide education and practice for neonatal nurses working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants and their families.



Image from Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz and Kelly (2013)⁵

Image courtesy of iStock

ACNN considers that

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants and their families have the right to live a healthy, safe, and empowered life with strong connections to culture and country.⁶
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are a diverse cultural group, and this must be considered in neonatal service planning and delivery at a local, regional, and system-wide level.^{7,8}
- Investment and promotion in culturally appropriate maternity/neonatal health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their infants will positively influence future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their families and communities.
- The disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous infant health and wellbeing is largely preventable and treatable, with a culturally appropriate, primary healthcare approach to antenatal care first and foremost. This requires consideration and recognition for resources and in funding allocations.
- Improving access and the cultural safety of antenatal, birth and postnatal care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is critical for improving outcomes for infants.^{6,9}
- Improving the standard of cultural safety and appropriateness provided in neonatal healthcare settings will positively influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family engagement and subsequent confidence in healthcare.
- The Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (CATSINaM) is the peak representative body for Indigenous nurses and midwives.

ACNN endorses

- Neonatal nurses as pivotal to providing culturally safe care, free from racism and sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants and their families.
- Accessibility to culturally appropriate neonatal healthcare services to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, their families, and communities.
- Exclusive breastfeeding for at least the first 6 months of life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, unless medically contraindicated.
- Physical, social, and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families during the neonatal period and to continue throughout the lifespan.
- Culturally sensitive education and training that provides content relevant to the history, culture, and health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including social justice issues.
- Importance of training to enhance cultural humility for all neonatal nurses working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, their families, and communities, including acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' holistic approach to health, illness, and wellbeing.
- Culturally sensitive support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander neonatal nurses and midwives.⁶
- Seeking out opportunities to promote and work in partnership to maintain positive health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, their families, and communities.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being involved in the development of standards for neonatal nursing/midwifery education and practice.
- Working in partnership with Aboriginal health organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professionals (such as CaTSINaM), to promote the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, families and communities through policy and advocacy.⁶
- Undertaking or engaging in research/improvement activities to identify initiatives that work to improve outcomes for Indigenous mothers, infants, and communities.

- Using culturally appropriate resources to educate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to improve health outcomes and reduce infant mortality.

ACNN's commitment

As the peak professional body for Neonatal Nurses in Australia, ACNN commits to:

- Engaging with CATSINaM, building a strong professional partnership in working towards a culturally safe and skilled neonatal nursing workforce.
- Providing education resources, including links to information on ACNN website, to encourage neonatal nurses to develop a comprehensive understanding of Indigenous history, culture and health outcomes to inform their nursing practice.
- Ensuring at least one session of every ACNN national conference is focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander maternal/neonatal health.
- Identifying and developing initiatives and incentives that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses/midwives in developing neonatal knowledge and skills. This may include a scholarship to financially support an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurse/midwife undertaking an accredited education program on neonatal nursing care.

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