

Apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People by the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses

Preamble

There is a history of colonisation of unceded Australian Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander lands that progressively led to dispossession, injustice, poor health and serious health and social disparity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Inlander Peoples. The hurts, harms and suffering associated with such injustice and disparity have continued unabated up to the present day. Since the establishment of nursing as part of the colonial infrastructure in the 19th century, and its development and consolidation in Australia up to the present, the nursing profession including mental health nursing, has been involved, sometimes knowingly and at other times unknowingly, in the perpetration of unjust and racist health and social care policies and practices. These must now be challenged, dismantled and replaced through the development and adoption of approaches that are acceptable to, have been co-designed by, and wherever possible are led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

We are listening to and learning from powerful statements such as the Uluru Statement of the Heart. We are watching the Close the Gap dashboard, among other things seeing that suicide among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples continues to rise. We recognise that large quantities of evidence exist demonstrating that social and emotional wellbeing and mental health disparity in Australia continues to perpetuate intergenerational harm and disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander Peoples. We know our profession must act more effectively to disrupt disparity, to more strongly advocate for parity and to promote capacity and capability to attain mental health and social and emotional wellbeing into the future.

This is the context within which the Australian College of Mental health Nurses wishes to acknowledge and apologise for the harms, hurts and suffering caused to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples by the practices of mental health nurses. The apology that follows is offered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples through the peak nursing and midwifery nursing organisation the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives.

Apology

As the voice of the mental health nursing profession in Australia, the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses apologises to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, for the past harms and injustices caused through the exercise of mental health nursing, including clinical practice, education, research and governance. We have taken time to reflect carefully and respectfully, and we can see that our practices and our institutions have failed to recognise the detrimental impacts our colonised (westernised) ways of being, doing, knowing and belonging have had for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. As a professional organisation we acknowledge the profound hurt, harm and suffering mental health nurses have caused for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We have not advocated when we should have done so. We have not called into question and disrupted health structures when we ought to have. As a profession we have been knowingly and unknowingly complicit in enabling and carrying out the policies of our employer institutions and governments.

On behalf of mental health nurses, we acknowledge that historically and into the present, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been harmed by the colonising practices of mental health nurses, which have been informed by government policies and agendas, and perpetuated through professional mindsets and behaviours and institutionalised forms of racism.

We express deep regret and shame that those harms have contributed to the inter-generational trauma of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families, communities. We wish to not only say sorry, but to also act sorry. That is, to act as allies and in collaboration with the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives, and Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Elders and communities to engage honestly and openly in real truth telling and the development of policies and practices to dismantle racism in all its forms and to establish and maintain restorative, just and culturally safe policies and practices to guide the work of mental health nurses in all health and social care situations and locations, that are based in the learnings from Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Australian College of Mental Health Nurses

What we will do: We do not seek to forget the wrongs and hurts of the past, but rather we dedicate ourselves to: **recognising** our need to respectfully engage in meaningful actions; position ourselves to **establish** relationships focused on building authentic social trust with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples; **reforming our understandings** by drawing near and paying respect to Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander knowledges, and ways of doing, being, knowing and belonging; and to **transform our profession through listening, partnership and collaboration focused on a better future** in which the mental health nursing profession and individual mental health nurses prioritise culturally safe and responsive care. We will be **brave** and challenge current practices and champion better ways of working in a **co-designed framework** for continuous change. Our actions will **not be hidden** but open to dialogue and feedback.

We respect the **uniqueness of individuals** and through listening to, learning from, and working together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and communities and with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health nursing and other nursing colleagues, we aim to strengthen the social and emotional wellbeing and mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, in our care and in our communities.

Through this apology, it is hoped to take the first step towards building a strong foundation for respectful, and culturally safe mental health nursing practice, education, research and governance.

Memorandum of Understanding

The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses wishes to formalise a Memorandum of Understanding, **co-designed** with the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives, as the basis to transforming our profession to include, integrate and prioritise holistic social and emotional wellbeing within the mental health nursing context and to enter into other initiatives of mutual interests to the two organisations. The intention is that such a Memorandum of Understanding will be agreed and ratified within one year of the offering of this apology.