



Australian Indigenous  
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# The Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet Guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Terminology

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*The Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters of Australia and the Torres Strait. We respect all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—their customs and their beliefs. We also pay our respects to Elders past and present, with particular acknowledgement to the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation, the Traditional Custodians of the lands where our offices are located.*



## The Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet Guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Terminology<sup>1</sup>

### Preamble

The Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet has a publically declared commitment to honour and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First people and custodians of Australia. These guidelines are an expression of that respect and should be read in conjunction with our Recognition and Acknowledgement of Country statements.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been subject to marginalisation and discrimination since colonisation. This has included deliberate attempts to separate them from the rich traditions of language and culture. English language was used in ways that perpetuated this injustice. The culturally inappropriate use of terms to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples individually and collectively is offensive to many. Today just as attitudes are changing, so too terms to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples are continually evolving.

### Purpose

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide Australian Indigenous<sup>2</sup> HealthInfoNet staff with guidance on appropriate terminology when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, and for use in all relevant policy, planning, programs, resource development and published materials. These guidelines are also consistent with the policy of Edith Cowan University<sup>3</sup> within which the HealthInfoNet is situated.

### Scope

These guidelines apply to all HealthInfoNet staff.

### Rationale

These guidelines provide appropriate terminology with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultures. It will better equip HealthInfoNet staff to work in a more culturally competent way, which will contribute to improving health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Terminology will vary between locations, and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or community groups should be consulted to identify preferred local terminology.

It provides a guide for HealthInfoNet staff on:

- ✓ collective names used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- ✓ terms associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and community organisations.

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of these guidelines have been reproduced and adapted with permission, NSW Ministry of Health 2015 from the publication *Communicating Positively: A guide to appropriate Aboriginal terminology*.

<sup>2</sup> Following consultation with members of the HealthInfoNet Reference group, which includes wide representation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non – Indigenous groups, communities and organisations a decision, on advice, was not to change the name of the organisation.

<sup>3</sup> Edith Cowan University (2021), *Inclusive language guide*

## **Collective names used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are Australia's original inhabitants. The term 'Aboriginal' is generally not inclusive of Torres Strait Islander people, and conversely the term 'Torres Strait Islander' is not inclusive of Aboriginal people. As Australia's population comprises people from both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, HealthInfoNet preference is for 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' to be used when referring collectively to Australia's original inhabitants.

### **Example**

- ✓ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people(s)
- ✓ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

## **Definition of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person**

### **According to s51 (25) of the High Court of Australia (1983):**

'An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.'

The lowercase word 'aboriginal' refers to an Indigenous person from any part of the world, and does not necessarily refer to an Aboriginal Australian. Therefore, HealthInfoNet preference is that 'Aboriginal' always be capitalised.

### **Example**

- X aboriginal and torres strait islander
- ✓ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

The abbreviation to 'ATSI' when used to describe people is offensive and should not be used in internal or external documents.

### **Example**

- X ATSI
- X A&TSI
- ✓ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

However, where it forms part of an acronym to describe such entities as organisations, abbreviations are used extensively and acceptably.

### **Examples**

- ✓ CATSINaM (Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives)
- ✓ A&TSIHB (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Branch)

### **Guidelines for correct use of 'Aboriginal'**

Although it is grammatically correct, the term 'Aborigine(s)' has negative connotations and should be avoided. 'Aboriginal' should be used as an adjective, not as a noun.

#### **Examples**

- X an Aborigine(s)
- ✓ an Aboriginal person/people
- X There were many Aborigines who came to the health clinic
- ✓ There were many Aboriginal people who came to the health clinic

The term 'Aboriginal' should never be abbreviated, as to do so is offensive.

### **Guidelines for correct use of 'Torres Strait Islander'**

A Torres Strait Islander person is a person/descendant from the Torres Strait Islands located to the north of mainland Queensland. 'Torres Strait Islander' should be used as an adjective, not as a noun.

#### **Examples**

- X There were many Torres Strait Islanders who came to the health clinic
- ✓ There were many Torres Strait Islander people who came to the health clinic

'Torres Strait Islander' must always be capitalised.

#### **Examples**

- X torres strait islander
- ✓ Torres Strait Islander

The term 'Torres Strait Islander' should never be abbreviated, as to do so is offensive.

- X TSI
- ✓ Torres Strait Islander

### **Guidelines for correct use of 'Indigenous'**

As 'Indigenous' is not specific, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel the term diminishes their identity and should be avoided. HealthInfoNet preference is to primarily use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander'.

- ✓ Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people (preferable)

The lowercase word 'indigenous' is only used when referring to people originating in more than one region or Country, therefore, when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, lowercase 'indigenous' is not acceptable.

- X indigenous
- ✓ Indigenous

Ensure that the use of the term 'Australian' does not infer exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- X The median age of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 21 years compared to the median age of Australians at 37 years

- ✓ The median age of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 21 years compared to the median age of Australians of other descent at 37 years (preferable)

### **A CAVEAT ON HEALTHINFONET USE OF THE TERM INDIGENOUS**

The HealthInfoNet produces a wide range of translational research outputs such as the annual **Overview of Australian Indigenous Health Status** and reviews of specific health topics. In these publications authors summarise and present data from other sources. It is often difficult to determine whether original sources are referring to Aboriginal people only, Torres Strait Islander people only or to both groups. In these instances HealthInfoNet staff are ethically bound to utilise the terms from the original source unless they can obtain clarification from the report authors / copyright holders. Readers may see the terms used interchangeably in some publications. If they have any concerns they should be advised to contact the HealthInfoNet for further information.

### **First Nations or First Australians**

Phrases such as First Nations or First Australians, while acknowledging Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional custodians of this land, can be problematic. First Australians can be seen to be discounting the sovereignty of the nations that existed in Australia before colonisation. First Nations is a phrase used extensively in North America and while gaining in popularity it is not the preferred term when recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

### **Terms associated with Aboriginal communities and community organisations**

#### **Self-identifying terms**

Aboriginal people have, nationally, terms of reference by which they may identify themselves. These terms are directly derived from the languages and names used by Aboriginal people in specific areas when referring to themselves. Where possible identify and refer to people using local terms derived from their own languages. Always check with a source before committing to writing.

#### **Examples**

- Murri – is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from Queensland and north-west New South Wales
- Goori – is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from northern New South Wales coastal regions
- Koori – is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from parts of New South Wales and Victoria
- Palawa – is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from Tasmania
- Nunga – is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from South Australia
- Yolngu – is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from Northern Territory (north-east Arnhem Land)
- Anangu – is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from Central Australia
- Noongar (preferred spelling at ECU)– is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from south-west Western Australia

### **Clan**

The 'clan' is a local descent group, larger than a family but based on family links through a common ancestry. A 'clan' is a subset of a nation.

Be aware that the term ‘clan’ has specific meaning, which derives from non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, and may not be applicable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use the term, its usage should be respected. If unsure, guidance should be sought from local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or organisations.

## **Community**

There are many different perspectives on what a ‘community’ is. In defining a particular ‘community’, consideration should be given to Stolen Generations, where a community may comprise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from many areas of Australia whereas Traditional Owners of the land are a particular group of people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may belong to more than one community – including where they come from, where their family is, and what organisations they belong to. However, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, community is primarily about Country, (extended) family ties, and shared experience. Community is about inter-relatedness and belonging and is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

It is generally acceptable to use the term ‘community’ to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living within a particular geographical region. However, the diversity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within that community should be considered where applicable.

## **Country**

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people have diverse relationships with, connections to and understandings of the Australian environment. Some of these relationships are based on the traditional knowledge and practice that have been passed down from generation to generation, while others have resulted from the various impacts of colonisation.

Relationships to Country are complex and interrelated. The term ‘Country’ is often used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to describe family origins and associations with particular parts of Australia. For example, a Gamilaraay man from south-west Queensland might say “The Narran Lakes area is my Country”.

## **Elder**

The traditional meaning of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elder is someone who has gained recognition within their community as a custodian of knowledge and lore, and who has permission to disclose cultural knowledge and beliefs. Recognised Elders are highly respected people within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In some instances, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people above a certain age will be referred to as ‘Elders’. However, it is important to understand that in traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, age alone does not necessarily mean that one is a recognised Elder.

The use of Elder (uppercase) is generally acceptable, but it is important to be aware of the differences in meaning outlined above.

When negotiating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, ensure that recognised Elders are involved. This may occur directly, or through other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people negotiating on the Elders’ behalf. Although negotiation with recognised Elders is important, it should not replace negotiation with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, such as the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Organisation.

## **Mob**

‘Mob’ is a term identifying a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people associated with a particular place or Country.

‘Mob’ is an important term for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as it is used to describe who they are and where they are from. ‘Mob’ is generally used between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Therefore, it is not appropriate for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to use this term unless it is known to be acceptable.

## **Nation**

‘Nation’ refers to a culturally distinct group of people associated with a particular, culturally defined area of land or Country. Each nation has boundaries that cannot be changed, and language is tied to that nation and its Country.

‘Nation’ may be used to refer to a culturally distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group and its associated Country.

Be aware that the boundaries of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations cross over state boundaries. This has important implications for service delivery and provision, as well as negotiation processes.

## **Traditional Owner**

‘Traditional Owner(s)’ is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people directly descended from the original Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inhabitants of a culturally defined area of land or Country, and has a cultural association with this Country that derives from the traditions, observances, customs, beliefs or history of the original Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inhabitants of the area.

Use ‘Traditional Owner(s)’ to refer to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or group as defined above. The HealthInfoNet recommends that all formal meetings, presentations and other gatherings should be opened with an acknowledgement of the Traditional Owners of the land on which the gathering is being taken place.

## **Tribe**

Like nation, a ‘tribe’ refers to a culturally distinct group of people associated with a particular, culturally defined area of land or Country. Be aware that ‘tribe’ has specific meaning, which derives from non-Indigenous societies, and may not be applicable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use the term, its usage should be respected. If unsure, guidance should be sought from local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or organisations.

## **Sorry Business**

The period of mourning for deceased Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people is commonly known as Sorry Business.

In many Aboriginal communities there is a prohibition on naming someone who is deceased, which may last for months or even years. When this occurs, a different name is used to refer to the person who has passed away.

Generally, the face of the person who has died should not be shown without warning, particularly to their own communities. You should always check with the local Aboriginal community before displaying or broadcasting names or images of deceased people.

### **Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners and Welcome to Country**

A 'Welcome to Country' is where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are traditional custodians welcome people to their Land. A Welcome to Country should occur in the opening ceremony of an event, preferably as the first item.

### **TERMS NOT TO BE USED**

The following terminology is inappropriate or dated, and **MUST BE AVOIDED AT ALL**

**TIMES AS IT IS OFFENSIVE:**

- ATSI
- Native
- Mixed blood
- Half-caste
- Quarter-caste
- Full-blood
- Part-Aboriginal
- 25%, 50% Aboriginal
- Them
- Them people
- Those people
- Those folk
- You people

### **Examples**

#### **'them'**

- X involving them in policy making decisions...
- ✓ involving members of the Aboriginal community in policy making decisions...

#### **'those people'**

- X an invitation inviting those people to attend the meeting will be sent out on ...
- ✓ an invitation inviting members of the Aboriginal community to attend the meeting will be sent out on...



**'you people'**

- X If you people need...
- ✓ If the Aboriginal community needs...

**Additional Resources**

Additional reading:

- Horton, D (1994) Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia – Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.
- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1997) Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/bth\\_report/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/index.html)

**Useful websites**

- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies  
<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/>
- Uluru statement from the heart  
<https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement>