

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People to Self-Identify in Mainstream Health Services

Why is recording Indigenous status so important?

- To allow Indigenous clients access to services tailored to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- To measure progress in closing the gap in health services between Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients.

Remember that all clients have the right to choose whether or not they want their Indigenous status recorded however they can only access this right if they are asked to self-identify in the first instance.

Recording information

- Clients have the right to self-report their Indigenous status
- All clients should have an opportunity to update any previous information including confirmation or alteration of their recorded Indigenous status
- The client's recorded response should not be altered or annotated in any way to reflect the views of the staff member collecting the information
- Best practice guidelines for data collection are available through the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- The *National Health Information Act of 2011* underpins the development, collection and maintenance of national data standards.

Why Indigenous people may not want to self-identify?

Trust and former government policies: Many indigenous people are still extremely wary of mainstream institutions. An example of this is 'The Stolen Generation' which is a real issue that still affects many Indigenous people.

Lack of awareness of why the question is being asked: Clients need to understand why the question is being asked, and require privacy when being asked to answer.

Health literacy and different cultural understandings of health: It is important to keep in mind that, for many Indigenous people, the concept of 'health', 'medicine' or the role of the 'doctor' may have a different meaning to that of a non-Indigenous person.

Privacy concerns: The lack of understanding that information disclosed to medical staff remains confidential.

Trauma response: People who are pre-exposed to trauma are often triggered in a clinical environment, and may be more likely to be on guard or seem uncooperative.

Language barriers: In many parts of Australia, especially in Northern Australia, the English language is often a third, fourth or even fifth language for an Indigenous person.

GET IN TOUCH Barbara Hammill Senior Project Officer – ATSI Health

t 08 8982 1043

Barbara.Hammill@ntphn.org.au

What can mainstream services do to encourage Indigenous clients to self-identify?

- Ensure that staff understand the process of self-identification and why it is important
- Ask the patient if they would prefer to see male or female medical staff
- Be welcoming and non-judgemental
- Take time to build rapport with clients
- Aid Health Literacy by making sure the client knows what the appointment is for
- Ask the national standard Indigenous question (see below).

Common mainstream barriers

- Lack of appropriate staff training which may mean staff are unaware of the need to ask the client about their Indigenous status and/or unable to fully explain to the client why it is important.
- A perception that if people do not 'look' Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander, they do not have the same health issues as people who identify.
- A belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people don't wish to be asked about their Indigenous status.
- Staff being fearful that non-Indigenous patients could be offended if they are asked the question.
- Judging a person's ethnicity by their appearance is not an accurate indicator of Indigenous status. The only accurate way is to ask the client.

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to self-identify in mainstream health services

National standard Indigenous status question: *Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?*
(Standard across key datasets, including ABS data)

The standard response options:

No

Yes – Aboriginal

Yes – Torres Strait Islander

For clients of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, both 'Yes' boxes should be outlined.

In Australia, an Indigenous person is defined by three components:

- Self-Identification
- Community acceptance
- Descent.

However, for the purposes of most Australian health services, self-identification is the only criteria which is necessary to access appropriate health services.

GET IN TOUCH Barbara Hammill Senior Project Officer – ATSI Health

t 08 8982 1043

Barbara.Hammill@ntphn.org.au
