

AFMW SUBMISSION TO SUPPORT THE ULURU STATEMENT FROM THE HEART

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Federation of Medical Women (AFMW) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Australian Government in support of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and for a First Nations Voice to Parliament that is enshrined in and protected by the Constitution.

Our organisation's origins in the early 1900s evolved from striving for gender equality in our profession and to meet the unmet basic needs of women in society. We are strong advocates for the need for self-determination, self-representation and advocacy, and being afforded respect and equitable access to, at the very least, basic human rights.

We echo the concerns raised by Indigenous Peoples regarding the disparity of health between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Peoples in Australia. As medical women engaged in healthcare in General Practice and Medical Specialties throughout Australia, we see direct evidence of the health impacts of inequality, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait women. Unacceptably high rates of incarceration, substance abuse, domestic violence, poverty, and homelessness, lead to higher rates of illness and malnutrition, more frequent obstetric and neonatal complications, greater maternal and infant morbidity and mortality, more mental illness and reduced life expectancy. Whilst cervical cancer in non-Indigenous women of Australia is all but eradicated, the rates in First Nation women in Australia are amongst the highest in the world, and survival in all cancers is reduced.

Contributing to this disproportionate burden of poor health, is the lack of parity in the representation of First Nation Peoples within our profession and in leadership roles in health care.

We believe that Constitutional Change to recognise the Voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Parliament is integral to addressing these issues nationally and to "Close the Gap" with due priority.

We recognise the importance of being valued, being able to speak as an equal, being listened to with respect and understanding, and lastly to have formal written affirmation of collective aspirational goals to achieve appreciable change.

We empathise with and are actively listening to the challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and offer our support in having their voices and wishes heard and acted upon. We



need to challenge the systems and constructs in Australian society generally, and within our medical profession, particularly in relation to racial equity, gender equity, and their intersection.

We acknowledge that health and well-being are inextricably linked to self-determination. We urge the Australian Government to truly acknowledge this also – not just in deed, but in whole-hearted commitment and action.

We also acknowledge the important role that women play in the health of communities - they are often the most passionate, bold and effective drivers of change within the family and the community. We uphold in particular the Voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. We highlight the voices of women contained within the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report* (2020) and ask that they also be heard and supported.

We would like to add our voice to those of our First Nation People as accomplices in this process.

FORMAL SUPPORT FOR THE ULURU STATEMENT FROM THE HEART

- AFMW concurs with the Uluru Statement from the Heart that this form of Constitutional change is a step on the way to embracing a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood for all Australians.
- AFMW supports a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.
- Members of AFMW would like to see full and fair representation of First Nations people where they can be directly involved in decisions that affect them and advocate for a model for the National Voice that is truly representative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

RECOGNITION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF VOICE

- The Uluru Statement from the Heart states that First Nations people seek to be heard.
- Our own mission statement proclaims us to be the voice of Australian medical women and so we have long recognised the power of a voice and of being heard.
- At all our meetings we speak from our own hearts when we repeatedly acknowledge that we live on lands where sovereignty has never been ceded.
- When we regularly acknowledge Elders past, present and emerging, it is a logical step to support the wish of First Nations people to be heard and to have a National Voice.



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the voice of Australian medical women

- The history of colonisation demonstrates there is no power to make real and lasting change, nor even to be heard, without Constitutional endorsement of a First Nations Voice forever protected in the Constitution.

In conclusion, thank you for the opportunity to make a submission calling on the Australian Government to support the Uluru Statement from the Heart and for a First Nations Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution.

Written on behalf of the Australian Federation of Medical Women by the members of the AFMW Reconciliation Action Plan Committee with editorial input from key representatives of Indigenous Engagement

For further information see:

<https://afmw.org.au/about/>

<https://afmw.org.au/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-medical-women/>

<https://afmw.org.au/purplebushmedicineleaves/>

Correspondence:

<https://afmw.org.au/contact-us/>



APPENDIX – Responses to the Five Questions from Submission Guidelines and Starter Pack

1. Please write a brief paragraph introducing yourself (our organisation).*

Who are we?

These are the Aims and objects of the Australian Federation of Medical Women (AFMW), as listed in its constitution:

The Aim of the Federation shall be to promote the professional development of medical women through education and research and to improve the health and welfare of all persons but especially women and children in the Australian community

The Objects of the Federation are:

- To advance the interests of medical women in all matters relative to their professional work by continuing education and other means
- To act for and represent Australian medical women in all matters of mutual interest at national and international levels
- To affiliate with the Medical Women's International Association and any other national or international organisation approved by the Federation
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2. Why do you think the Uluru Statement from the Heart is important?

- It is the culmination of the collective voice of the largest gathering of First Nation people in 2017 describing:
 - The spiritual connection between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to the land, over more than sixty millennia, and their basis for sovereignty which has never been ceded nor extinguished
 - The enormous scale of the crisis being faced
 - The desire for empowerment through constitutional reforms
 - The aspiration for a Makarrata Commission for a fair and truthful relationship with Australia through self- determination
- It has been developed in a process of self-determination lead by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- It is not a token measure, but is something that will make a real difference
- It is a unanimous declaration of what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people want, and a common goal for all to work towards
- The order, Voice, Treaty, Truth, recognises that substantive constitutional structural reform must be achieved to ensure political legitimacy before moving forward with agreement-making

3. Why is it important for Indigenous people to have a say in matters that affect them?

- There is a general lack of knowledge and understanding in the community of the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including traditional cultures, and experiences of since colonisation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples own and understand this socio-cultural background and are best placed to ensure due consideration is given to all relevant background when decisions are made that impact them.
- There is currently entrenched powerlessness with high rates of incarceration and health inequality.
- It helps change the balance of institutional power in decision making to give a voice to First Nations' people.
- It will help ensure the brightest possible future for First Nations' young people

4. How could a voice to parliament improve the lives of your community?

- Members of AFMW believe that the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will improve when there is full and fair representation of First Nations people in our profession, so they can be directly involved in decisions that affect them
- The AFMW advocates for a model for the National Voice that is truly representative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- It empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have a seat at the decision-making table, and, in fact, compels this.
- A seat at the decision-making table, in turn, will enable First Nations' people to influence the systems that influence community wellbeing.
- Such systems include those that influence rates of incarceration, deaths in custody, youth detention, youth incarceration and numbers of First Nations' people removed from their families and country including through the child protection system.

5. Why is it important to enshrine the voice to parliament in the constitution rather than include it only in legislation?

There are a number of reasons why this is important:

- If enshrined in the Constitution, the Voice to Parliament requires a Referendum and consensus from the population, and will have greater protection from abolition.
- If legislated, particularly without bipartisan support, the Voice to Parliament would be at risk of being revoked due to a change in government.
- It is vitally important that any reform reflect the wishes of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament is the only reform that has received the collective support and endorsement.
- This will ensure that changes to First Nations' representation and power at a political level cannot be made by government, but only by the Australian people. Change in this space has historically been hugely disruptive. This will help enable First Nations' communities to plan beyond the three year political cycle.