Background

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia suffer levels of mortality, morbidity and compromised wellbeing far in excess of non-Indigenous Australians. This reflects issues of social injustice, particularly persistent social, economic disadvantage and the historical legacy of colonisation with its destruction of Indigenous culture.

Mental health professionals within Australia have been slow to respond to the social and clinical needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the response to Indigenous needs has often been from a biomedical perspective which has denied the social and historical context. Such a perspective fails to take into account of the strengths and resilience of Indigenous cultures and populations.

Openness to new models and the modification of old ones

It cannot be assumed that the ethical and clinical models derived from a western individualistic viewpoint can be automatically applied to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities. Nor should we assume we have a mandate to automatically apply such models. That is not to say that such models are not useful; it is more that parts of such models, in some circumstances, may need to be discarded or greatly modified.

Health Professionals and Stereotypes of Indigenous People

Health professionals and scientists have considerable influence in the creation of stereotypes and over their eventual abandonment. At times, health professionals have contributed to the development of pejorative and disempowering stereotypes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. On the other hand, health professionals have considerable influence over the beliefs and practices of the wider community and can make great contributions to breaking down prejudice and unfair practices. Psychiatrists have an important part to play in the removal of prejudice from all mental health services and the encouragement of Indigenous community efforts to improve mental health and social and emotional well being.

Participation and Partnership

Historically, the control and delivery of health services in and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have not involved their participation and the profession of medicine and the discipline of psychiatry have been very slow, by comparison with other Anglo settler societies (Canada, the United States and New Zealand) in supporting Indigenous entry into the professional workforce.

Political Implications

Health professionals need to be aware that interventions within the arena of Indigenous health necessarily have political implications. Involvement in this area of professional practice often involves challenging government policy and community attitudes which have the potential to impact negatively on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social, emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing.
Guidelines

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists has prepared the principles and guidelines below to help psychiatrists and psychiatric trainees work constructively and effectively with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities and organisations.

1. For a health professional to allow stereotyping and prejudice to influence thinking about or behaviour towards individuals and communities is a serious breach of ethical and practice standards.

2. Participation, partnership, respect, negotiation and a willingness to learn are the paths psychiatrists should follow if they are going to make a useful contribution to the mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

3. The College recognises that optimal mental health care and access to appropriate mental health services is a right of all Australians.

4. The College requires that mental health services and private psychiatrists should always respect the dignity and human rights of those who seek or require help with mental health or social and emotional problems.

5. The College recognises that there is a broader understanding of mental health within indigenous communities. This involves a holistic construction of social, emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing.

6. The College is firmly committed to the principle that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are entitled to effective mental health care which is appropriate to their culture and needs.

7. The College believes that negotiation, consultation, participation and partnership should be the basis on which psychiatrists and psychiatric trainees assist with mental health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

8. The College recognises that the asymmetry of power is often amplified in interactions between mental health professionals and Indigenous Australians. Effective and empathic communication between non-Indigenous professionals and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients may require special effort and resources. Psychiatrists should be aware of and acknowledge their own cultural assumptions, respectful of the client and the client's culture and learn about those local factors (historical, contextual and behavioural) which support effective and empathic communication.
With regard to their own knowledge and attitude, psychiatrists and psychiatric trainees should:

- recognise the importance of land, spirituality and culture to the mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- understand and respect cultural traditions as they affect verbal and non-verbal communication
- understand that a culturally appropriate and safe environment is necessary for indigenous people to resolve mental health problems and do their best to help provide such an environment
- recognise that working with Indigenous Australians may require special expertise and understanding
- recognise that special expertise and understanding of indigenous mental health issues is available within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, especially from Indigenous health and mental health workers
- recognise that traditional healing practices of Indigenous Australians may have much to offer in the treatment of mental health and social and emotional problems
- understand the mental health implications of the history of contact between Indigenous Australian communities and Australia’s mainstream society
- understand the tragic impact which attitudes and policies of the mainstream Australian community have had on the mental health and social and emotional well being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and take this into consideration when working with Indigenous Australians
- recognise that social injustice, racism and mainstream hostility and ignorance are still causing serious suffering and mental ill health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- recognise that the serious general health problems which burden the lives of so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have, as a significant part of their cause, social, emotional, substance abuse and psychiatric difficulties which are often untreated or inappropriately treated
- be aware of, respect and acknowledge the value systems and protocols which exist in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
• resist the stereotyping of any client or patient because of ethnic, cultural or racial background and pay particular attention that this does not happen with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

With regard to how they behave and deal with Indigenous Australians, psychiatrists and psychiatric trainees should:

• promote the mental health and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities

• work to increase their personal understanding of the culture and traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

• always treat Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are patients or clients with courtesy and dignity and allow for difficulties and differences in dealing with health care systems

• make whatever contribution is possible to the improvement of courtesy, understanding and flexibility in mainstream mental health facilities

• treat Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and mental health workers as respected colleagues with special knowledge which can be essential for appropriate mental health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

• make every effort to ensure that the language used during consultation does not present a barrier to full understanding and sharing of information and, if necessary, make use of Indigenous health professionals and interpreters to facilitate communication

• seek out and utilise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise including traditional and contemporary practitioners

• take into account cultural differences when considering the result of any standard evaluative processes

When undertaking research projects involving Indigenous Australians, psychiatrists and psychiatric trainees should:

• refrain from doing studies which will harm the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander subjects of the study or their communities
• ensure that the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community involved and individuals participating in any research study are involved in a proper process of informed consultation and that the NHMRC Guidelines on Ethical Matters in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research be followed

• follow the human research ethics policy of the RANZCP and consult with the involved community and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health organizations regarding the ethical implications of any study

• recognise that the knowledge gained from a research project has been provided by the subjects of the study and that such knowledge should be developed in conjunction with the Indigenous subjects of the study and shared with them

• consult with the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community or individuals studied to see if some service can be offered in return for the privilege of having access to the community for study purposes

Suggested reading

Further information can be obtained the Australian Indigenous Mental Health website:

http://indigenous.ranzcp.org

The Australian Indigenous Mental Health website was set up by the members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health Committee behalf of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. The purpose of the website is for people to gain both knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health issues. The Committee’s aim is to work together with mental health professionals to improve the mental health and life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

References

These guidelines were prepared by the RANZCP Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health Committee in consultation with Indigenous mental health workers and communities.