

Defining the roles of Aboriginal Health Workers and Aboriginal Health Practitioners

Introduction

Defining the role of the ¹Aboriginal Health Worker and Aboriginal Health Practitioner is often challenging, leaving most individuals innocently use the following titles or terms without actually understanding the differences involved:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner
- Traditional Healer
- Indigenous Health Worker
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce.

Various documents developed have attempted to define these roles, however as the roles evolve this sometimes creates confusion. This document will provide key references and explanations to give clarity around the roles of Aboriginal Health Workers and Aboriginal Health Practitioners across NT Health.

The National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners (NAATSIHWP) has developed a position statement on the role which can be found on their [website](#).

Background

Indigenous Health Worker, is a term used to collectively describe Indigenous health workers across the globe who share the common fundamental skills and knowledge of [primary health care](#).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners are often referred to as Indigenous Health Workers due to these commonalities.

Traditional healers and traditional medicine in Australia have been around since the dreamtime. For many Aboriginal people the dreaming continues to live within them, as does traditional healing and medicines.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce term is used to collectively describe all individuals who identify as being of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, employed across all health professional and non-professional classifications and streams. Meaning but not limited to allied health professionals, doctors, dentist, nurses and midwives, cleaners, drivers, administration officers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners.

Registration

Aboriginal Health Workers and Aboriginal Community Workers have been working in the Northern Territory (NT) since 1870. Their roles and training have evolved over the years, and they have been trail blazers and strong advocates for both professions.

The humble beginning of the Aboriginal Health Practitioner evolved from the Aboriginal Health Worker profession.

NT Health initially developed the 'Basic Skills' training program teaching additional clinical skills to Aboriginal Health Workers, such as how to safely give medications, injections and suturing. This resulted in the NT Aboriginal Health Worker Registration Board being established in 1986, the regulation of Aboriginal Health Workers, the protection of the Aboriginal Health Worker title across the NT, and the defining of the Aboriginal Health Worker.

During this era, Aboriginal Health Workers in other jurisdictions were not regulated. There were no clear definitions or protected titles until 2012 when the [Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health Practice Board of Australia \(ATSIHPB\)](#) was established under the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme for health professionals.

On 1 July 2012, registered Aboriginal Health Workers in the NT were automatically transferred across and became registered Aboriginal Health Practitioners.

The titles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner, Aboriginal Health Practitioner, and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner are currently protected titles under the *Health Practitioner Regulation National Law Act 2009* (the National Law), which governs the national registration and accreditation scheme for these health professions.

Today Aboriginal Health Workers and Aboriginal Health Practitioners are seen as two unique professional groups in the Australian healthcare sector, often described as 'one mob, two families', they share the same national training package and professional association.

Their work is specifically focused on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, beginning at home with their families and continuing through to a primary health care setting. They are the conduit between traditional health and western medical services, providing prevention, early detection and early intervention health care services to assist individuals, families and communities to achieve self-health care, and are crucial in the delivery of cost effective health care within a culturally safe environment.

Aboriginal Health Worker

Aboriginal Health Workers share core disciplinary foundations and similar roles and responsibilities as the Aboriginal Health Practitioner, however unlike them, they are not a regulated profession.

Aligning with national initiatives and key stakeholders, the following criteria for an Aboriginal Health Worker will be used:

- Must be of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent
- May be a full member of [NAATSIHWP](#)
- Must have a relevant [qualification](#) in Indigenous Community Health and/or Aboriginal Health Work
- May have completed an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health course, this is inclusive of the old NT Aboriginal Health Worker Basic Skills certificate
- May have been previously registered with the Northern Territory Aboriginal Health Worker Board and/or the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practice Board of Australia
- Core business is Aboriginal Primary Health Care

Individuals who do not have the above, but are currently employed in the healthcare sector with one of the following job titles, roles and/or experience will be considered:

- Aboriginal Community Health Worker
- Aboriginal AOD Worker
- Aboriginal Mental Health Worker
- Aboriginal Aged Care Worker
- Aboriginal Chronic Disease Worker
- Aboriginal Health Promotion Worker
- Aboriginal Men's Health Worker
- Aboriginal Strong Women Worker
- Aboriginal Strong Men Worker

Aboriginal Health Practitioner

An Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner is a person registered by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practice Board of Australia (ATSIHPBA).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner title is a protected title under the national scheme, therefore the criteria is defined by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner Board:

- Must be currently registered with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner Board in the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra)
- Must hold the relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care Practice and/or equivalent qualifications
- Must be of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent
- Meets all other registration standards including criminal history, continuing professional development, regency of practice, professional indemnity insurance arrangements, and English language skills.

Ahpra registration standards may be accessed from their [website](#).

Aboriginal Health Workforce

The term Aboriginal Health Workforce, is generally used when discussing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in the healthcare sector as a collective group, regardless of which professional stream and/or classification they are employed under; meaning it is inclusive of cleaners, gardeners, drivers, administrative officers, senior executives, doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, Aboriginal Health Workers and Aboriginal Health Practitioners.

National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care Qualifications

Packaged in the national HLT Health Training Package, there are currently seven VET qualifications directly related to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker & Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner Profession.

The qualifications are:

HLT - Health & Community Services Training Package	
ATSI Primary Health Care and/or Practice	
Aboriginal Health Workers	Aboriginal Health Practitioners
<p>HLT60113 Advanced Diploma in ATSI Primary Health Care</p>	
<p>HLT50113 Diploma in ATSI Primary Health Care</p>	<p>HLT50213 Diploma in ATSI Primary Health Care Practice</p>
<p>HLT40113 Cert IV in ATSI Primary Health Care</p>	<p>HLT40213 Cert IV in ATSI Primary Health Care Practice</p>
<p>HLT30113 Cert III in ATSI Primary Health Care</p>	
<p>HLT20113 Cert II in ATSI Primary Health Care</p>	