

# Turn our scars into stars:

Hunter New England and Central Coast Primary Health Network (HNECC PHN) – Inverell and surrounding communities

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Forum

22 January 2020



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HUNTER NEW ENGLAND  
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An Australian Government Initiative

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# 1. Introduction

The Inverell and surrounding communities healing forum was the first of four forums to be delivered across New South Wales in 2020 through a partnership between HNECC PHN and The Healing Foundation. The aim of the healing forums is to increase access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-identified approaches to improving the healing and wellbeing needs of HNECC Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The forums aim to:

- empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to identify and design local, culturally relevant approaches to meeting the healing and wellbeing needs of their community
- resource localised approaches to healing that are driven at the local level and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that address mental, physical, emotional and spiritual needs, and also connection to culture, family and land
- integrate community healing programs with existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental clinical services – including both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled and mainstream services – to ensure services holistically meet the clinical and cultural healing needs
- promote community development and meaningful partnerships to strengthen the sustainability, community governance and service delivery of community healing programs.

The Inverell and surrounding communities Healing Forum was co-designed by The Healing Foundation, PHN and local Inverell Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members to ensure the forum agenda remained focused on local priority issues.

Thank you to the forum planning group members, including Uncle Ron Connors, Auntie Joyce Livermore, Uncle Henry Weatherall, Robyn Brown, Hilda Duncan, Michael Duncan, Matthew Cutmore and Daren Finn.



## 2. About the Healing Forum

The Inverell and surrounding communities healing forum was held in the conference room of the Inverell RSM Club on Wednesday 22 January 2020. The forum, facilitated by Rowena Lawie, commenced with a Welcome to the Gomeroi Nation from Uncle Ron, who shared his wish for participants to leave with knowledge and understanding of each other. Uncle Ron told participants 'As the day goes on people will open up about what's going on in their community – it takes time, have patience.'

Uncle Alex Munro's dance group then performed a Welcome Dance for close to 70 participants, including community members from Inverell and Tingha and workers from health service across the region, including NSW Police, NSW Lands Council, family support services, alcohol and other drug rehabilitation services and NSW government.

While the forum provided a space where service providers could learn the experience and healing support needs from community members, there was some disappointment from community members about the limited participation of decision makers from some services.

The forum agenda was structured around three key yarning circles with guiding questions to encourage discussion around priority healing themes identified by the forum planning group:

1. healing for our young people
2. healing from grief and loss
3. building a trauma aware, healing informed health support network.

Participants identified the following values to guide discussion on the day:

- no right or wrong answers
- people need to remain non-judgemental, show respect and give respect to each other
- people need to listen to, respect and accept each other's opinions
- groups need to mix and accept diversity, with Elders and local steering committee members sitting together
- be open minded and inclusive
- speak your truth with respect
- respect confidentiality and privacy – remembering what's said in the room stays in the room (sacred yarning) and allowing participants to speak off the record, keeping the important themes and issues will go in the report).

Before discussion commenced Aunty Joyce lit a candle and participants shared a minute of silence to remember those who have passed.

### 3. About this report

This report is named in honour of a quote from Uncle Ron, who shared his vision for healing to 'turn our scars into stars'. It was informed by analysis of notes taken on the day during feedback from the yarning circles that explored participants' insights into factors undermining community wellbeing and suggestions for how health and other services can support community healing. The report is structured around input in relation to questions that guided discussion on the day.

### 4. Key themes from the discussion

The following is a summary of key themes that emerged from analysis of input from yarning circles at the forum that were structured around three themes:

1. healing for our young people
2. healing from grief and loss
3. building a trauma aware, healing informed health support network.

Much of the discussion related to healing for young people. Healing from grief and loss was interrelated so some content from discussion related to these two themes has been combined.

## 5. Key issues and factors discussed in yarning circles

### What are the issues impacting our children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing?

#### Grief and loss

*'There's been lots of sadness in Tingha and Inverell over the years.'*

A recurring theme throughout discussion at the healing forum was the interrelationship between trauma, grief and loss, with significant concerns about the impacts of suicides on the Tingha and Inverell communities. Forum participants talked about how young people in particular are impacted by Sorry Business, with the loss of other young family members and peers as well as the loss of Elders. It was suggested that young people increasingly act on emotions rather than talking about issues, highlighting a need to support young people to develop emotional regulation and coping mechanisms and 'learn how to grieve'. Discussion highlighted how ongoing loss compounds existing trauma:

*We need supports for young people and their families, for as long as it takes. Trauma is ongoing for our communities. It's not just one loss.'*



#### Trauma

*'When there is trauma, people forget about their health.'*

While the relationship between Sorry Business and trauma was emphasised, there was also much discussion about the issue of trauma more broadly. Concerns were raised about the impacts of trauma for children who have been removed from families as well as those who have been exposed to domestic and family violence. In some instances trauma manifests in depression and disconnection.

Community members acknowledged a cycle of intergenerational trauma that is being passed on through generations with no opportunity for healing. Self-medication with alcohol and other drugs is symptomatic of trauma but also exacerbates complex trauma. Community members identified the need for a strategy to help young people to understand trauma, including the story of the Stolen Generations, the subsequent cycle of intergenerational trauma, how it impacts them and strategies they can adopt to de-escalate their feelings. The flow-on effects of trauma were also discussed, with one participant explaining that 'When there is trauma, people forget about their health – forget dental, doctor, they lose all hope'. This heightened the need for services to take a holistic approach to health and wellbeing and support evidence-based outcomes 'rather than just take funding'.

## Cultural disconnection

*'Kids need cultural healing, going on Country – especially those taken away from families.'*

Another factor that was identified as undermining children and young people's wellbeing was disconnection from Country and culture. There has been a loss of identity and language, which in some instances is exacerbated by family breakdown, while some forum participants attributed this disconnection to a lack of leadership amongst our own. Some community members suggested that 'constant death' in the community results in a continuous cycle of grief, which prevents community members from taking kids out on Country to learn about bush food, make claps sticks and learn about culture. Community members shared sadness that connection between Elders and young people does not always happen, due to the fact that the middle generation are very disconnected.

## Social media

*'They live their life on there, following American life in a cul-de-sac on the mission.'*

Social media was cited as especially detrimental to young people's self-worth and social connection, with one participant describing young people as 'isolated in technology'. The culture of having online followers and being 'liked' on social media was cited as creating unhealthy pressures on young people. This resulted in many young people feeling low self-worth and feeling ostracised.

The amount of time spent using technology further undermines opportunities for young people to connect with culture and go on Country. Racist posts on social media that stigmatised 'young Aboriginal people in hoodies' further marginalise young people and undermines their pride in identity. Some participants though highlighted the potential to harness young people's interest in online media to provide access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander telephone support or wellbeing apps targeted to young people.

## 6. Barriers to culturally safe, trauma aware, healing informed service providers

*'There are non-Indigenous people who don't understand our ways – counsellors who don't understand what we're feeling.'*

Discussion at the forum suggests that the impacts of trauma are exacerbated by the absence of a trauma aware, healing informed service network. Much of the discussion focussed on the inadequate response to suicide in the community, with one participant saying 'People from services blow in and blow out and nothing is done.'

The absence of services for young people on the ground in Tingha was strongly emphasised, with a number of participants voicing the need for youth workers and programs there all the time. The importance of meaningful support for children with trauma, which should not be time restricted, was also stressed, as 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture grieves differently'. Discussion suggests an over-reliance on crisis response and a need to increase the focus on early intervention.

It was reported that many young people feel worthless and are isolated but stigma and the 'shame factor' prevent them from accessing services and talking about problems. Community members suggesting a role for mentors with lived experience who have been through the same situations young people are facing. There was agreement on the need for trauma aware, healing informed support for children in schools and through youth service providers as well as health services – 'Someone needs to sit and talk to that child and help them understand what's going on'.

Concerns were also raised about the lack of support for Elders, who are seen as carrying the burden of supporting children and young people. One participant commented 'There's no one to help the Elders. They can only do so much and they're grieving too – they need support.'

There is a perceived lack of awareness of the prevalence of trauma and complex need among health service providers, which means that 'treatment that occurs is not always accurate for the behaviour. Participants suggested that it would be valuable to train Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers around how to deal with trauma and mental health issues in the community. Participants also conveyed a perceived lack of understanding and awareness of community issues and support needs among local police, a lack of support from the local shire council and overall poor coordination of services.





## Lack of access to resources

Forum participants indicated that they face increasing restrictions in efforts to access basic resources needed to hold community events and programs and to take young people and other community members to participate in activities elsewhere. Participants reported being unable to access the community hall at Tingha due to council restrictions related to insurance. The lack of access to vehicles prevent community members from being able to take groups of young people on Country. Community members shared a desire to take young people on trips to broaden their life experience, citing the example of young people from Brewarrina being taken on a trip to the coast to experience the ocean for the first time. There is also a need for resources such as funds to pay community members to lead activities and drive buses, pay for fuel, food and other resources to support positive experiences for young people.

## Other issues

A number of other issues that undermined young people's wellbeing were also mentioned:

- racism, as evidenced through the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed locally (with participants acknowledging the much higher visibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in Moree)
- unemployment, with the suggestion that Inverell would benefit from a key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employment initiative like the Aboriginal Employment Strategy partnership with Moree farmers some years ago
- boredom, due to lack of youth recreation options and unemployment
- Alcohol and other drug use, with concern raised by some participants about ice use.



## 7. Healing solutions

### What role can our services play to support healing for young people?

**One of the key questions discussed at the forum was how can our services support our healing from grief and loss (including suicide response)?**

#### **Build a proactive, flexible and trauma aware, healing informed service sector**

*‘Services need to get out and spend time in the community.’*

There was consensus among forum participants that a very different approach to service delivery is needed to address the needs of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. While further recommendations specific to the health sector are detailed in Section 5, priorities identified for broader service delivery reform in Inverell, Tingha and surrounding communities include:

- the need for services to be delivered on the ground in communities, with one participant advising ‘Spend time in the community, get to know people, people won’t go to your office. Every week, not just once.’
- programs and services need to be tailored to the needs of local communities, for example ‘Programs for Tingha might not be right for Ashford’
- services, including health, justice and education, need to ensure staff are non-judgemental, trauma aware, healing informed and can provide cultural safety for clients – ‘Don’t go in there with your personal values’
- cultural awareness training involving local Elders is a priority for all services, including health, police and all education staff
- an increase in proactive, rather than reactive, services was also encouraged, with participants suggesting the need for early intervention workers to support children and young people in schools and community settings
- workers need to be skilled to assist young people to overcome ‘the shame factor’ and ‘have them speak their truth’. Kids need to understand how trauma, social media and eating disorders can affect them, and learn self-care strategies
- services need to be aware of the impact of trauma on workers, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who are supporting others while dealing with their own grief – ‘We’re never fully healed, there’s one trauma after another.’
- services need to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways are different and people have different needs – funerals, family care etc.



## Filling the gap in service provision for children and young people

- The need to increase access to support services specifically for young people was reiterated throughout the forum. It was stressed that services and workers need to 'work with young people where they are, not where we want them to be'. A range of support needs were suggested:
- the establishment of recurrently funded youth programs, especially in Tingha, was identified as a priority. Clontarf was cited as a good example of how a program can work well with local young people.
- there is a need for more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers and specifically early intervention workers in schools and other services so young people have someone they can trust to talk to before a crisis. One participant suggested early intervention is needed to focus on social wellbeing for children from the age of five years and up.
- funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mentors who have lived experience dealing with the issues children and young people are facing was recommended. These workers could be in school settings, youth services and programs or other services.
- community leaders and service providers should recognise the youth who are achieving as conduits to positive change for other young people.
- talk to young people and ask them 'What do you want?'
- support programs that allow young people to connect with culture through art, story, poetry, dance, song and woodcraft (see 'Cultural healing – Connecting kids to Country and culture' below). 'Teach them old ways – strength comes from learning'.
- when considering youth programs it is important that programs appropriate for girls are included as well as programs for boys.
- young people should be involved in the development and delivery of youth and community programs and on steering committees. They need the opportunity to develop skills and be given a voice. Consider a youth healing forum.
- access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counsellors or an indigenous youth wellbeing app were also suggested.
- BEST Employment or other service providers need to reopen an employment centre in Tingha.



## Service coordination and accountability

- Forum participants suggested the need for better coordination across health service providers and accountability for service delivery that responds to community need. Suggestions included:
- holding a forum where all health service providers (both state and Commonwealth funded) come together regularly to ensure strategic coordination of health service delivery. This forum could provide a mechanism for policymakers to engage with community networks to continue discussion about their ongoing healing support needs.
- mapping of all health services and initiatives and promotion via key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community networks to improve awareness of available services.
- three levels of government need to come together, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous services and police, to align their services and identify the gaps.
- services need to ensure client confidentiality
- there is a need for a means for funding bodies to engage with communities to monitor the performance of funded health service providers and make them accountable
- establishment and promotion of a clear complaint handling process so community can raise concerns about inadequate and inappropriate health service delivery.

Forum participants also suggested a need for collaboration across service sectors if holistic healing is to be supported. One example suggested was that police should reach out to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services if young people are taken into custody so they can check on their wellbeing. It was also suggested that the shire council has a role to play in enabling access to venues and supporting programs for young people in the community.

## Support for collective community healing

Participants voiced the need for services to support opportunities for community members and families to engage in community healing initiatives that understand and respond to the local collective experience. Suggestions included:

- services, especially health services, to offer whole of family support to extended families who have experienced grief
- consider group programs that support collective healing for Elders, families, young people, women and men. These could include week long back to Country camps.
- create a space in schools and programs for Elders to mentor young people, sharing stories in schools and youth programs so that knowledge and support can be passed on
- support for initiatives that empower men to step up, demonstrate responsibility and play a part in teaching kids about culture and responsible behaviour
- support for non-punitive programs that support parents and carers to raise healthy children with confidence
- support events spaces and gatherings where young people and Elders and other mentors can come together. This could occur in community-based services such as Linking Together Centre.

## Provision of access to resources

Services have assets as well as funding that can provide resources that are needed for community members to lead local community healing activities, such as taking kids on Country, taking Elders and carers for 'time out' and to enable community members to access programs and events. Discussion suggests this could include:

- funds to pay local community members to work on projects
- release of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency staff to help with events and programs
- provision of vehicles and possibly drivers to transport people to events and to take Elders out for their own healing time
- access to halls, meeting rooms and venues or payment of insurance costs to access local facilities for community strengthening events
- provision of a bus that could be painted by local artists and shared across services
- funds to establish a local multipurpose centre
- provision of meeting rooms and catering for community network meetings (Elders, women's and men's groups).



## How can we build the capacity of our community to support each other through grief and loss?

A number of suggestions were made as to how community could support healing for young people as well as the broader community. Some of these suggestions would benefit from support from service providers but would need to be led by community.

### Strengthening community networks

Strengthening community networks would not only support local community decision-making but it would provide a means for service providers to engage with key community leaders and promote information, awareness and training. Forum participants recommended a number of ways to rebuild a sense of community, including:

- support for Elders councils
- support for men's and women's groups – noting there are men's sheds but no dedicated spaces for women
- men's and boys' and women's and girls' camps involving Elders
- establishing networks of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people service providers.

### Build community capacity

Community have a role in ensuring the success of community education and awareness raising (above) by ensuring the right people in community are identified and engaged to build capacity to help others. Suggestions included:

- encouraging people to participate in health education about trauma, grief and loss and how to support others through it
- promoting available services through events such as football games, Knockout, community barbecues and family fun days
- identifying people in the community who would be appropriate to check in on people who may be struggling with grief, trauma or depression
- teaching Elders and other older people how to use social media so they can post messages of support to others in the community
- promote online tools such as the 'Yarn Up, Feel Deadly' app to community to promote to others
- checking in on the wellbeing of Elders who are supporting others to deal with grief
- arranging days away on Country for Elders when they have experienced Sorry Business
- ensuring support for family members affected by suicide.



## Reinstating kinship structures

Conversation among participants identified the need to reinstate kinship structures and cultural responsibilities as a platform to support community healing – ‘Our Elders set the standards in our communities and transfer the knowledge to the young’. This is a process that could occur as part of a broader collective community healing strategy supported by health and other service providers.

Benefits of reinstating kinship structures include:

- Elders setting the standards for appropriate behaviour and the community enforcing them.
- communities collectively caring for children. This includes Aunties, Uncles and community leaders talking to kids to ensure they are okay and pulling kids up if they do the wrong thing.
- Elders and senior family members teaching young people to understand their role as young men and young women. This includes men stepping up to be positive role models and teach young men about respect for women and themselves.
- families welcoming other families into their home, especially during Sorry Business.

## Cultural healing – connecting kids to Country and culture

There was significant discussion about the need to connect young people with culture and teach them how to care for Country. In some instances community members can lead this while some activities will require support and resources. Community suggestions include:

- establishing a ‘Kids on Country’ program that allows Elders to pass down knowledge to young people, including kids who have been removed from family
- engage cultural leaders to teach kids language, art, craft, dance, toolmaking and other cultural practices and to understand how cultural practice can support healing. This could occur in community, at special youth events and in schools.
- teach kids about Country, including bush medicines and foods and how to care for Country.



## How can we build a health service model that is accessible and meets the needs of community?

### Culturally safe, trauma aware, healing informed holistic health care

While recommendations for the service sector are outlined above, suggestions specific to health service providers were also shared at the forum. Participant suggestions include:

- health services need to increase access to skilled, trauma aware, healing informed grief and loss counsellors, where and when they are needed. Support must be sustained as long as it is required – ‘follow through, don’t just tick a box and not go back’.
- clinical health workers need cultural mentoring. Take them out of their offices and out on Country.
- have culturally competent staff from the front desk all the way up – first impressions make people feel welcome
- services should be co-designed with community at the beginning
- take mainstream services to drop-in centres in the community where people are – not at the hospital
- create more opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Services to collaborate with mainstream health services
- deliver services when people need them and are available.
- while participants recommended increased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment in the health sector (see below), it was suggested that non-Indigenous health workers could be partnered with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers to create trust and safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients.
- there is a need for trauma experts to provide education about trauma awareness, trauma aware, healing informed practice and strategies to manage trauma across the broader service sector and the community, including young people.
- participant insights highlight how service needs are not isolated within distinct portfolios, suggesting there is a need for health support for children in schools and for people taken into custody.

Some forum participants suggested the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific telephone counselling services and apps for young people to access.



## Community education and awareness raising

*'Services ... we don't know what they do, especially in terms of grief and loss and suicide.'*

Discussion at the forum identified a number of ways that health service providers could support the community's capacity to support others in the community who are experiencing grief, loss and trauma. The need to promote available services was stressed as was the need for regular ongoing communication between services and community. It was suggested that information and education could be provided via community networks (see Strengthening community networks above), events and dedicated information sessions. Suggestions included:

- a strategy to map and promote all available health supports across community (potentially through the suggested network of all health service providers).
- trauma awareness education for community members, including young people.
- trauma awareness and trauma aware, healing informed practice education for the broader service sector, including police and schools
- conversations with community about how to engage young people in conversation about their wellbeing
- conversations with community about how to support people who are grieving
- provision of Mental Health First Aid and Accidental Counsellor training to community members
- holding community barbecues and events where Elders, health workers and young people can come together and talk.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development

The need to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers across services was highlighted, as was the potential benefits of upskilling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers to support social and emotional wellbeing. The importance of establishing job pathways for young people and creating opportunities for young people to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people role modelling employment was also raised. Recommendations included:

- training up familiar faces that young people can talk to in the services. Consider cadetships, workers with lived experience and involving community volunteers.
- increasing the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clinicians and social and emotional wellbeing workers in health services
- professional development to strengthen social and emotional wellbeing support skills among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers
- increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identified jobs across the broader service sector
- working with job service providers to provide more practical support to young people – supporting job applications, interview skills, IT skills, etc
- partnering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers with lived experience with non-Indigenous staff, including clinicians
- involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

## Support healing for Elders and carers in the community

There is significant concern about burnout among Elders and other community leaders who care for others while dealing with their own grief and loss. Some suggestions made at the forum to support caring for Elders included:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers to take Elders for time out on Country
- enabling access to facilities and resources for Elders' meetings and gatherings
- pampering days for Elders
- Elders being remunerated for work in supporting healing for the broader community.



## 10. Conclusion

In conclusion, Catherine Turner, HNECC PHN Executive, thanked the local healing forum steering committee members and forum participants and reassured them that senior PHN staff had all been present and the community had been heard. PHN undertook to take this report back to the steering committee for feedback and to discuss the next steps, with a view to ensuring the participation of young people.

One participant shared 'I feel a lot better than when I came in' while one of the Elders shared that at the age of 80 'This is the first time I've seen black and white come together'. Aunty Joyce thanked everyone for their participation and commented 'I learned a lot'.

Rowena asked participants to form a circle and share a word that reflected their thoughts on the day. Key reflections included privileged, power, deadly, spiritual, reassuring, empowering, hopeful, motivated, challenged, inspired, informative, blessed and coming together as one.





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