

11 June 2018

Joint Select Committee on Constitutional  
Recognition Relating to Aboriginal and Torres  
Strait Islander Peoples  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Committee,

**Re: Inquiry into Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Peoples**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

cohealth fully supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart and strongly urges cross party support to give effect to it as a matter of urgency.

The Referendum Council, through the extensive consultation and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander peoples from across the nation, has considered a range of models for constitutional recognition, including the criteria for referendum success. The Uluru Statement from the Heart is the culmination of this work and was unanimously approved by the First Nations National Constitutional Convention as the most appropriate model. It is a fundamental requirement that the form of proposed constitutional recognition be supported by First Nations peoples – as the Uluru Statement from the Heart is.

cohealth is one of Australia's largest not-for-profit community health services, operating across 14 local government areas in Victoria. Our mission is to improve health and wellbeing for all, and to tackle inequality and inequity in partnership with people and their communities.

cohealth provides integrated medical, dental, allied health, mental health and community support services, and delivers programs to promote community health and wellbeing. Our service delivery model prioritises people who experience social disadvantage and are consequently marginalised from many mainstream health and other services – including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

As a large rights based not-for-profit organisation cohealth is keenly aware of the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be represented in the Australian Constitution, and in the policies and decision making processes that affect them. Over 200 years of dispossession and colonisation have had a significant and well documented detrimental impact on the health and welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people.

Research on the social determinants of health is incontrovertible, autonomy and self determination are fundamental to good health. That when people lack



autonomy - when people are not able to be in control of their own lives, rather are being controlled or dominated by others or by their social, economic, or political circumstances - their mental and physical health tends to deteriorate, and for those who feel the least autonomous, the outcomes are generally the worst<sup>1</sup>.

This can be changed, and as the Lowitja Institute – Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research – states, constitutional recognition will provide a sound foundation for addressing the social and economic determinants of health and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup>

We were profoundly disappointed at the rejection of the Uluru Statement by the Prime Minister, and the lack of respect this showed to First Nations peoples. The blatant misrepresentation of the Uluru Statement to justify this rejection was particularly alarming. Nonetheless, we know that Australian people think differently, with polling showing that 61% already support the concept of a voice to parliament.<sup>3</sup> Cross party support would only increase this number. What we now need is the political leadership to ensure constitutional recognition becomes reality.

For more than a decade constitutional recognition has been promised, and a succession of inquiries and consultations has raised hopes that it will occur. The Uluru Statement from the Heart has delivered a roadmap for change. As a nation we need to move beyond inquiry and talk and ensure that constitutional change outlined in the Uluru Statement from the Heart is implemented as a matter of urgency.

cohealth urges the Committee to recommend a process to build cross party support for the model recommended in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Yours sincerely



Lyn Morgain

Chief Executive

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/05/26/self-determination-and-indigenous-health-is-there-a-connection/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lowitja.org.au/recognisehealth/why>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/oct/30/most-australians-support-indigenous-voice-to-parliament-plan-that-turnbull-rejected>

