

Walking Together, Learning Together to help Close The Gap

In September 2021, Central Queensland, Wide Bay Sunshine Coast PHN launched a new training program for GPs, aimed at improving the physical, social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

'Walking Together, Learning Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Competency for Health Professionals' is a one-day training program developed by the PHN to help primary health care professionals like general practitioners in their role in Closing The Gap.

The PHN's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Coordinator Gordon Browning said the course was developed in response to demand from local clinicians, and a lack of accredited cultural competency training in the primary health care sector.

"The aim of Walking Together, Learning Together is to give local health providers an insight into how government policies and historical events have had a major impact into the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in our region," Mr Browning said.

"Part of the five-hour training includes video firsthand accounts from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people talking about their experience of the primary health care system.

"These insights can lead to a better understanding into why some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members find it difficult to engage with the health sector.

"There's also information on specific MBS billing items, quality improvement activities and suggestions on how general practices can create a welcoming space for their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients."

More than 900,000 people live across the Central Queensland, Wide Bay and Sunshine Coast region, with approximately 4.5% (nearly 40,000) identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or South Sea Islander.

Juanita O'Rourke from the PHN said the organisation's recent health needs assessment survey revealed significant gaps in access to appropriate healthcare services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander living locally.

"One of the ways to close these gaps is to provide education to health providers such as general practitioners and allied health staff in meaningful and practical ways," Ms O'Rourke said.

"Health professionals need to know how to engage and understand what our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members see as their significant health issues, how to support them and their family towards better health outcomes.

"Even something as simple as asking the question – do you identify as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander – can be very powerful."

Mountain Creek-based general practitioner Dr Ben Schussler, originally from the United States, was one of twenty health practitioners to participate in the inaugural training session, held in Maroochydore on a Saturday.

"I thought the training was both very useful and very enjoyable," Dr Schussler said.

"I previously worked in Indigenous Health in Far North Queensland and want to continue a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health here on the Sunshine Coast.

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"I find these trainings very helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of Indigenous culture; having that understanding is vital to delivering appropriate and effective healthcare.

"Sometimes, as doctors, we can get tunnel vision, so to speak, in just looking at the medical issues a patient has.

"We have to remember that those medical issues are interconnected with all the other aspects of our patients' lives.

"When dealing with people whose culture goes back more than 50,000 years, one can never learn enough."

The PHN will run two sessions of the Walking Together, Learning Together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Competency for Health Professionals in Wide Bay in October, with sessions in Central Queensland to follow in November.

40 RACGP CPD points apply, ACRRM points pending.

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