

Indigenous Health in Australia

Key Facts & Strengths



Who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Peoples of Australia, with continuous cultures dating back over 65,000 years. There are hundreds of distinct Nations, language groups, and cultural practices across the continent.

Today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up approximately 3.8% of Australia's population, with most people living in urban and regional areas.

Indigenous health is a distinct discipline

Indigenous health is a rigorous, interdisciplinary field that draws on health sciences, public health, social sciences, law, education, and Indigenous knowledges. It focuses on understanding how culture, history, systems, and community leadership shape health and wellbeing.

Rather than viewing health solely through a biomedical lens, Indigenous health emphasises holistic, strengths-based approaches that recognise the social, cultural, and structural dimensions of health.

Understanding Health: A Holistic View

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, health is understood holistically. It includes:

- Physical health
- Mental and emotional wellbeing
- Connection to family, community, culture, Country, and spirituality

This approach recognises that health and wellbeing are shaped not only by biology, but also by history, relationships, culture, and self-determination.

Key Health Statistics

Some health inequities remain, reflecting the ongoing impacts of colonisation, dispossession, and systemic racism:

- Life expectancy is shorter on average than for non-Indigenous Australians.
- Higher rates of chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and kidney disease.
- Greater exposure to social determinants of ill health, including housing insecurity and barriers to culturally safe care.

These outcomes are not caused by Indigenous identity or culture, but by structural and historical factors.

Strengths-Based Perspectives in Indigenous Health

Culture as a Strength

Strong cultural identity is associated with improved mental health, resilience, and social and emotional wellbeing. Cultural practices such as ceremony, language, storytelling, and caring for Country support healing, identity, and continuity across generations.

Community Control and Self-Determination

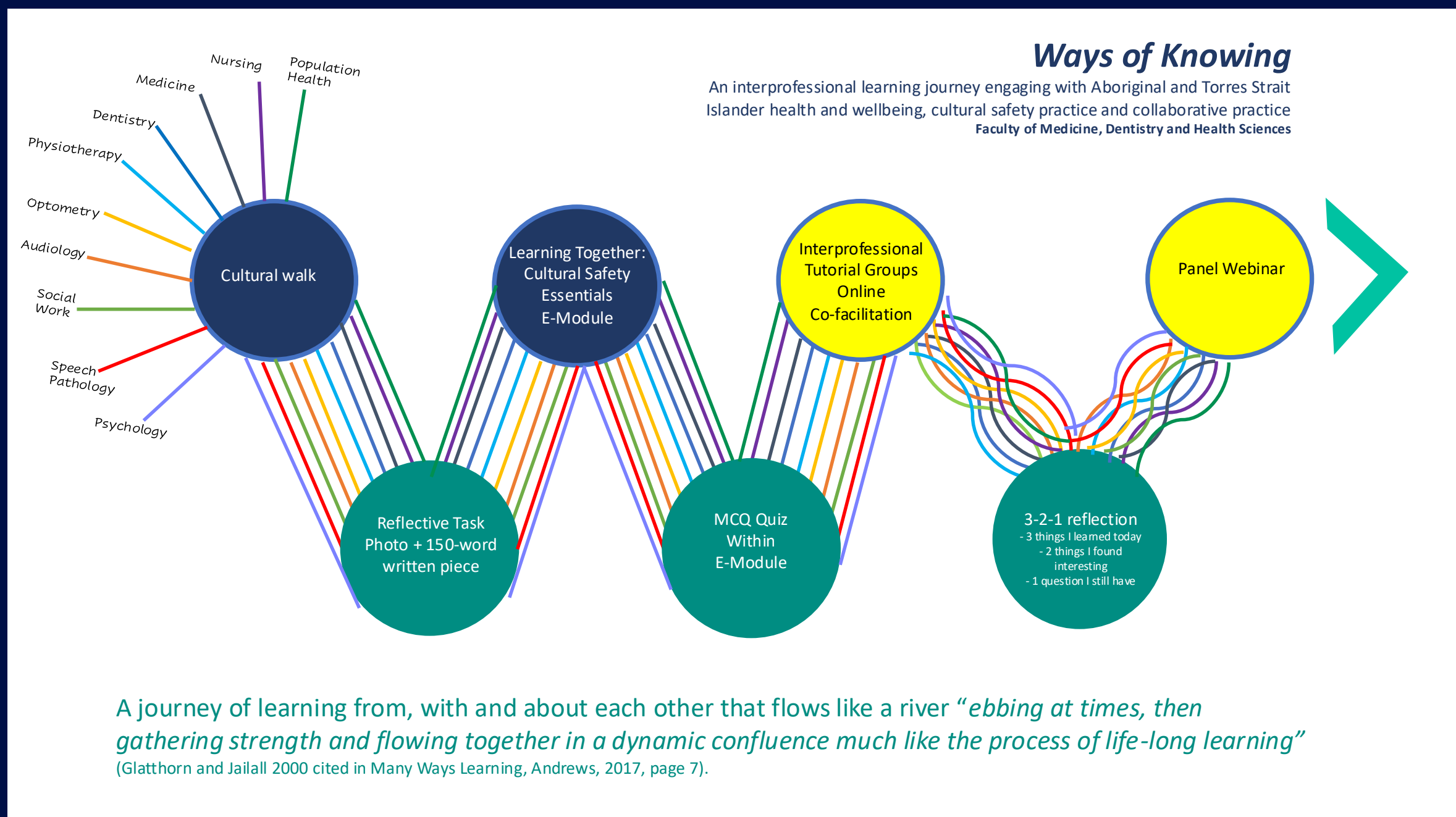
Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) provide holistic, culturally safe, and community-governed care. Evidence consistently shows improved engagement and outcomes when communities lead the design and delivery of health services.

Closing the Gap: Progress and Ongoing Challenges

The national Closing the Gap framework aims to reduce inequities across health, education, and socioeconomic outcomes.

While progress has been uneven, a key shift has been the growing emphasis on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, partnership, and accountability. Evidence shows that outcomes improve when approaches are co-designed and strengths-based, rather than imposed.

Ways of Knowing and Indigenising Health Curricula (1)



Across the Melbourne School of Health Sciences, students engage with the Ways of Knowing program as part of broader efforts to Indigenise health curricula.

Ways of Knowing and Indigenising Health Curricula (2)

Ways of Knowing:

- Introduces Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing alongside Western health frameworks.
- Encourages reflection on power, privilege, bias, and the impacts of colonisation in health systems.
- Supports the development of culturally safe practice, grounded in respect, listening, and relationship-building.
- Positions Indigenous knowledges as contemporary, rigorous, and essential to health education.

Indigenising the curriculum involves embedding Indigenous perspectives across courses, moving away from deficit narratives, and preparing graduates to work ethically and effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Learning Indigenous Health: Preparing Clinicians for Diverse Communities (1)

Understanding Indigenous health strengthens students' ability to work across many cultural contexts, not just Indigenous settings.

Moving Beyond “Colour-Blind” Practice

Colour-blind approaches in healthcare can unintentionally overlook how culture, history, and power shape health experiences. Culturally responsive practice instead:

- Acknowledges difference without stereotyping
- Values cultural knowledge as a clinical and professional asset
- Encourages reflection, humility, and adaptability

Learning Indigenous Health: Preparing Clinicians for Diverse Communities (2)

Transferable Skills for Future Health Professionals

Learning about Indigenous health helps students develop skills that are critical across health systems, including:

- Communicating effectively with diverse patients, families, and communities
- Understanding how belief systems and social context influence health decisions
- Adapting care to meet the needs of different cultural groups
- Reflecting on one's own position, bias, and professional responsibility

Why This Matters for New Health Sciences Students

As future health professionals, researchers, and leaders:

- You contribute to the creation of culturally safe and equitable healthcare systems
- Indigenous knowledges strengthen practice across all settings
- Indigenous health is central to ethical, effective, and inclusive healthcare