



SEWB Network members at the SEWB Gathering 5 in October 2024.

Story behind the gatherings



Prof Pat Dudgeon

I'm proud to be the founder, and one of the leaders, of the national Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) Network. We're led by a consortium, comprised of the Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing (TIMHWP) project, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia (GDPSA), and the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA). Together, we've created an Australia-wide coalition of SEWB and mental health representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, academics, practitioners, policy makers, and front-line workers. We're advancing our vision of SEWB healing, measurement, and advocacy – working together to better the future for our people.

How it began

It all began in 2021 when we held our first Social and Emotional Wellbeing Gathering on Noongar Country, here in Boorloo (Perth), Western Australia. This gathering saw the formation of the SEWB Network and the recommendations which we have developed and worked towards with each subsequent gathering. Over two days in March 2021, delegates from across Australia came together to yarn about social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our aim was to bring together Aboriginal and



Dr Graham Gee and Uncle Moogie Sumner during the Welcome to Country on Day 1 of the SEWB Gathering 5.

Torres Strait Islander peak bodies, community organisations, leaders, experts and front-line workers to create a national Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) forum for the future. The gathering was hosted by TIMHWP UWA, NACCHO, and Gayaa Dhuwi Proud Spirit Australia.

Seven months later our network came together, again on Noongar Country to advance our critical work in support of our recommendations; this is when the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association joined us, a key partner in the consortium. In 2022, we then met on Ngannawal/Ngambri Country in the ACT, and then in 2023 we came together on Larrakia Country in Darwin, Northern Territory for our fourth gathering. These gatherings have been a vital opportunity for us to come together as a community, researchers and policy makers, to share our stories and experiences, and explore ways to enhance the SEWB of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through connection, kindness, and caring. The gatherings are a space to engage in meaningful discussions, listen, learn, and celebrate our rich cultural heritage – together in this way,

we strengthen our collective efforts to promote mental health and wellbeing within our communities. Each Gathering has a different focus which is decided on together.

Fifth gathering

Last year we were pleased to deliver our fifth Social and Emotional Wellbeing Gathering. Network members from across Australia came together in Tarndanya (Adelaide) on Kaurna Country, South Australia (and online via Zoom) to discuss SEWB for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over three days, from October 15-17, 2024. The theme was *One Health: The Health of the Environment, Animals, and People* and the attendees were welcomed to Country by Ngarrindjeri Elder, Uncle Major 'Moogie' Sumner AM. This gathering had a special focus on environmental determinants of health and SEWB across the lifespan.

One of our presenters, and a fellow host, Professor Helen Milroy AM, shared the importance of totems and storytelling. She spoke about how totem stories connect us to nature and keep us thinking about the world around us and how we can care for it. "We are born, we live on, and we go back



Hosts of the SEWB Gathering 5 (from left to right): Tony Kiessler (AIPA), Prof. Pat Dudgeon AM (CBPATSIISP/TIMHWP), Prof. Helen Milroy AM (GDSPA/TIMHWP) and Monica Baroltis McCabe (NACCHO).

to the earth; people and Country are inextricably linked. Stories allow the person to take their own understanding, to listen and learn a way forward. Stories don't tell you what to do, they leave you autonomous to choose what you want to do with the knowledge."

The theme of One Health was drawn on by many of our presenters, with topics ranging from companion animals and their importance to family structures, cultural stories and provision of warmth to the 'River Ecology', a metaphor for healing by Rowena Lawrie who described it as, "rivers are life, the veins of Country, controlling flow. Everything inside a river is connected to the outside of the river." These concepts of One Health were discussed among workshop participants across ten workshops hosted throughout the gathering. Participants acknowledged that when people are connected to Country, animals and community, they are building intergenerational resilience, strengths, and self-determination.

At the close of the SEWBG-5, participants were invited to provide feedback, which came back overwhelmingly positive. One SEWB Network member said "the Gathering offers such

rich engagement with the content and sectors and workforce. This is great for our spirit."

The national SEWB Network continues to grow stronger and to work even more collaboratively, strengthening the partnerships between, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), policy makers, health and mental health clinicians and practitioners, and mainstream health organisations. This work aims to support Outcome 14 in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enjoy high levels of SEWB. The work of the Gatherings and the Network members, aims to develop, translate and disseminate the evidence base on SEWB and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention, and further the collective understanding of best practice in SEWB for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Professor Pat Dudgeon AM is a Bardi woman from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. She is a psychologist and Director of the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSIISP) at the University of Western Australia.