

The journey from the ATSISPEP to the present



Pat Dudgeon

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP) [2015 to 2017] was funded to identify programs and services most effective in responding to high rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide and was the first national mapping of Indigenous-led suicide prevention in Australia. It was great that the School of Indigenous Studies, at the University of Western Australia (UWA) led this project, in collaboration with The Kids Research Institute and the Healing Foundation. The ATSISPEP provided the foundation for the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSISP).

Prior to the mid-2010s, national suicide prevention efforts in Australia did not specifically address Indigenous suicide. For example, the 1999 National Suicide Prevention Strategy and the 2011 – 2012 Taking Action to Tackle Suicide funding package did not include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a group with particular needs. As recognition grew of the distinctive issues in Indigenous suicide, this began to change, and it became clear there was a need for an evidence base for Indigenous suicide prevention programs and the factors which contribute to their effectiveness.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP) was developed to meet this need; it aimed to prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of working, to establish Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance, strengthen the evidence base for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention, and develop an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural framework for suicide-prevention services and programs.

UWA led a national Indigenous-governed research team and oversaw the coordination of numerous community roundtables across urban, regional, and remote Australia. Consultations were held in regional areas with



Handing the 'Solutions That Work: What the Evidence and Our People Tell Us' report to Nigel Scullion (Indigenous Affairs Minister at the time) at the report launch event.



With Professor Tom Calma AO at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Conference in Alice Springs in 2016.

Indigenous communities, including in the Kimberley (Western Australia), Darwin (Northern Territory), and Cairns (Queensland), as well as on issues relevant to specific groups or topics such as youth, justice, and LGBTQI, to investigate the key factors which determine the success of an Indigenous suicide-prevention intervention. We ensured the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples shaped the findings of this project.

In 2016, we analysed and summarised our findings in our influential report, *Solutions That Work: What the Evidence and Our People Tell Us*. This report has had an impact on Indigenous mental health and suicide prevention in Australia; we clearly identified the key elements for best-practice suicide-prevention programs and strategies and made recommendations for improvements to existing services

and programs.

The outcomes directly informed the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy (NATSISPS). This strategy, recently renewed for 2025–2035, continues to cite ATSISPEP as its core evidence base, a decade after the original report. Our findings were crucial in addressing high rates of Indigenous suicide in Australia and the evaluation changed the way Indigenous suicide was addressed in Australia.

In May of the same year (2016), we convened the first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Conference in Alice Springs, bringing together over 400 delegates from communities, government, and academia. Keynote speakers were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people including Stan Grant and Rosalie Kunoth-Monks. Also speaking alongside

me, was Professor Tom Calma AO (Co-Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Advisory Group at the time), and Richard Weston, (CEO of the Healing Foundation at the time), among many others. The themes for the conference program were community-based solutions, social determinants, partnership, clinical factors, and sharing knowledge. The outcomes of the conference also informed the 'Solutions that Work' Report.

Later, the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSISP), UWA, was established to develop and share evidence about effective suicide prevention approaches for Indigenous people and communities.

It built on the outcomes of the ATSISPEP to influence Indigenous suicide-prevention policy, practice and research by promoting access to evidence and resources, and through advocacy.

The CBPATSISP has centred the rights of Indigenous people and communities to self-determination, and the critical importance of cultural responses to distress alongside clinical approaches.

Our important work has included clearing houses of best-practice programs, services and research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention, accessible resources to support implementation of best-practice suicide-prevention responses, within communities and by governments, and policy consultations and submissions to promote self-determination and Indigenous governance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander suicide-prevention services.

Looking back at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project and the work that was produced, we can see that we were part of a huge change that has centred Indigenous suicide prevention. Self-determination and cultural approaches are key parts of this change.

The most important factor that will bring about the change we hope for is an increase in the number of community-led programs and services. Examples of this which already give great hope are national programs like NACCHO's Culture Care Connect, structural change such as the National Agreement Policy Partnership in Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB), the establishment of Gayaa Dhawi (Proud Spirit) Australia, and the central inclusion of Indigenous people in policies at all levels.

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This is part a series of *Koori Mail* columns about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention contributed by authors from the CBPATSISP, which was established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide-prevention approaches for Indigenous people and communities.