

*Approved: 2002*

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## Indigenous Health

### Background

It is a well-known fact that the health of Indigenous peoples remains the worst of any group within the Australian community<sup>1</sup>. Life expectancy is 15-20 years less than the non-Indigenous population and rates of hospitalisation exceed those for all Australians in every age group (AIHW 2005). However, there are some signs of improvement in health indicators. For example, over the last 40 years there has been a slow reduction in Northern Territory Indigenous mortality rates for all age groups, especially children under 5 years (Condon et al. 2004). The health status of Indigenous people in comparable countries (New Zealand, Canada and USA) is much closer to that of other citizens (Ring and Firman 1998) suggesting further gains are achievable.

As an initial response to this situation the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) developed an Indigenous health position statement in 1996. Since this time there have been significant changes within Indigenous health policy and planning. The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health sets a reform agenda for the decade 2003-2013 and was endorsed by all Australian Health Ministers (NATSIHC 2004). The APA position statement on Indigenous health has been reviewed to align it with this framework.

### Principles

The APA affirms the nine principles outlined in the National Strategic Framework (see Attachment 1). These principles should guide interactions between APA members and staff with Indigenous people and organisations.

### The role of physiotherapy in Indigenous health

Indigenous health outcomes are determined by historical, social, political, environmental, cultural and economic factors as well as access to effective primary health care services. Physiotherapy is an important part of comprehensive primary health care. Physiotherapists work within a framework of empowering the individual, carer or the community through education and the promotion of self-management of health and well-being.

Physiotherapy has an important role in the prevention and management of many of the conditions and illnesses that affect Indigenous Australians disproportionately. For example:

- Indigenous people experience higher rates of disability than other Australians. In 2002, in non-remote areas, the rate of those aged 18 years or over with a profound or severe core activity limitation was 2.1 times that of the rest of the population (AIHW 2006). Physiotherapists assess, diagnose and treat people of all ages with movement problems so that they can live as independently as possible.

- In 2004-05, 33% of Indigenous peoples reported musculoskeletal conditions, including arthritis at 17% (AIHW 2006). Physiotherapy is an essential discipline in the prevention and management of these conditions.
- In 2004-05, Indigenous peoples had a high prevalence of respiratory diseases (30%), diabetes (12%) and circulatory problems (22%) (AIHW 2006). There is a significant body of evidence relating to the effectiveness and cost efficiency of physiotherapy in the management of chronic conditions such as these.

Physiotherapy has an integral role in a wide variety of other areas such as rehabilitation after injury, child health, gender-specific health issues and assisting older people. Physiotherapists also help people prevent injuries and maintain fitness.

Physiotherapists can provide services to Indigenous peoples in a range of contexts (urban, regional and remote) and settings (including hospitals, private physiotherapy practices, community health services, sport facilities, schools, workplaces, aged care facilities and outreach services for remote communities).

Despite the potential for physiotherapy to improve Indigenous health outcomes, there are major gaps in access to physiotherapy services. Where services do exist, there is often limited utilisation by Indigenous peoples, particularly in the private sector (APA 2005). Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services are the preferred and most culturally appropriate organisations to deliver health services to Indigenous people, but access to physiotherapy in these organisations is poor and needs to be improved (APA 2005). A 2001 survey of the 1216 discrete Indigenous communities, mainly in remote Australia, found that 60% had no access to physiotherapists (ABS & AIHW 2003). There is no comparable data on access to physiotherapists by the majority of Indigenous people who live outside these communities.

Factors such as distance from services, availability of transport, availability of culturally appropriate services, workforce shortages and private health insurance cover affect access to, and use of, health services (APA 2005). Indigenous participation in service delivery also impacts on access. As in other health-related professions, Indigenous people are under-represented in the physiotherapy workforce. In 2001 there were 29 Indigenous physiotherapists – 0.3% of all physiotherapists (ABS & AIHW 2005).

### Improving access to physiotherapy for Indigenous Australians

The APA is committed to working for the better health of the Australian Indigenous population. The Association places particular importance on greater accessibility to and utilisation of culturally appropriate physiotherapy services. In line with the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, the APA supports:

- Resource allocation that reflects greater Indigenous health need;
- Improved access to physiotherapy for Indigenous peoples as part of comprehensive primary health care;
- Increased Indigenous participation in planning and management and of physiotherapy services and increased support for community controlled health services who want to provide physiotherapy services;
- The need to increase the number of Indigenous peoples working as physiotherapists;
- The need to equip physiotherapists with the appropriate skills and knowledge to meet the needs of Indigenous peoples;

- The need to identify the most important evidence gaps and an approach to improving information that monitors how well the profession is meeting the needs of Indigenous peoples.

To this end the APA actively seeks ongoing collaboration with Indigenous organisations and communities to develop priorities and mechanisms for enhanced physiotherapy involvement. The APA will also develop partnerships with other health care providers and with other sectors that impact on Indigenous health.

### References:

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Condon J, Barnes T, Cunningham J and Smith L (2004): Improvements in Indigenous mortality in the Northern Territory over four decades. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health 28: 445–451.

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