



Submission in response to the Revision of the Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023

28 February 2020

1. About us

ALIA

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. On behalf of our 5,000 personal and institutional members, we provide the national voice of the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support.

Improving library services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

In February 2019, ALIA published a report (ALIA, 2019) detailing how libraries across Australia are working with local communities to develop culturally appropriate programs and collections, and to make our locations culturally safe places. The report speaks to the work of libraries in family history support services, truth-telling, internet services in remote communities, digital literacy, and reading in English and first language.

National early language and literacy strategy

ALIA is part of the National Early Literacy and Language Coalition. The focus of the coalition's current activity is on scoping and developing a National Early Language and Literacy Strategy for Australia. (National Early Literacy and Language Coalition, 2019)

Early childhood is a crucial time for the development of language and literacy. However, in Australia many children fall behind their peers in early language and literacy development before they start school. This issue crosses the domains of health, education, and social services, and Commonwealth, state and territory, and local government. As such it is difficult to address efficiently and effectively without a nationally coordinated approach.

The Coalition includes partners who are leading practitioners in the area of Indigenous literacy.

2. A revision of the Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023

Libraries across Australia are focused on improving services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, developing thoughtful programs, taking a more respectful approach to collections and working with communities to acknowledge and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Our aim is to help improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and in this context, we welcome the opportunity to contribute to this discussion. In summary:

- We applaud that cultural and social determinants are the foundations for the plan's structure.
- We fully support the flexible structure of the implementation plan, in particular that it allows for local response and input, which mirrors our own experience in shaping library services.
- We note that the plan also accounts for the total life course of an individual, and that it recognises the importance of early intervention on life outcomes.
- We are particularly supportive of the recognition of the interconnectedness of the focus areas and acknowledge the challenges that this will bring. We stand ready to contribute to the area of cross-sector partnerships.

3. Relationship between health and literacy

3.1 Literacy and health literacy

Poor literacy levels are a matter of social equity and social justice. Literacy is an important social and cultural determinant of health and well-being across the whole population.

General literacy, education, and health literacy are all interrelated. A person's formal and informal education shapes their general literacy, which in turn contributes to their knowledge and skills in understanding health information and systems, and shapes their capacity for making decisions and taking action for their own health and health care. (Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, 2014. p 53)

The revised implementation plan, with its aim to embed the social and cultural determinants of health at its foundation, is reflective of the values and efforts of libraries around Australia, as we work to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, throughout their life course, with the resources and skills to access information. (ALIA, 2019)

3.2 Importance of early intervention

About 6.5% of Australian children start primary school vulnerable in the developmental area of language and cognition. This number is double for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. (Australian Government, 2016) Despite positive movement in the right direction, in 2012 an Indigenous child was nearly three times more likely and a child (Indigenous or not) living in a remote community twice as likely to be *Developmentally Vulnerable* or *At Risk* for language and cognitive skills. (Dr Jackie Huggins et al, 2012)

Children who start behind, usually stay behind. Developmental vulnerability at kindergarten tends to be compounded throughout life, with children who have difficulty making their transition to school more often ending up with poor educational attainment and low functional literacy. (Australian Government, 2014)

At the outset of a child's life it is post-natal health practitioners who are well-placed to advise families on the nature of language and literacy development and how crucial the pre-school years are.

Language synapses in the brain are growing most rapidly in a child's life at nine months, and sight and hearing even earlier. It is imperative that families understand the importance of reading, talking, singing and playing with their children from birth, and are supported to do so, in culturally appropriate ways. (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018)

We strongly support the acknowledgement of the importance of early intervention and preventative measures, as a focus area for the implementation plan. We also encourage the increased representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the library workforce as they are best placed to support families as first teachers, in culturally safe and supportive ways.

3.3 Impact of health on literacy attainment

An example where health complications can have a significant impact on an individual's development, educational attainment – and particularly literacy levels, is that of hearing loss due to Otitis Media during childhood. It is the key condition contributing to hearing loss among Indigenous children, and it is treatable and preventable. The educational, social and emotional disadvantages associated with chronic otitis media are often compounded leading to life-long negative consequences for the child, as well as their family and community. (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018)

With reference to the significant impact poor hearing health often has on the development of literacy skills, we note and support the incorporation of the key priority of “ending avoidable blindness and deafness” in the revised implementation plan.

4. Cross sector partnerships

The Australian Library and information Association (ALIA) instigated the formation of the National Early Language and Literacy Coalition (NELLC) around four years ago, after recognition that there were a range of professions and entities, alongside libraries, that play

an active, important and interconnected role in language and literacy development from birth and throughout the pre-school years. We recognised the need to work better together to amplify our voices, learn from each other, and to reduce inefficiencies that are often found in responses to multi-faceted issues in our society.

With this in mind, we applaud the inclusion of 'cross sector partnerships' as a focus area for the revised implementation plan, and we would welcome the opportunity to be active participants in local initiatives.

5. In conclusion

ALIA is supportive of the proposed implementation plan's structure, vision, foundations and focus areas. We are grateful for the opportunity to provide feedback and look forward to continuing our association with the development and delivery of the initiatives and actions as a result of the plan's successful implementation.

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