



KEY THINKERS FORUM

— Briefing Paper —

THE 1967 REFERENDUM IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH THEN, NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

About Poche Centres for Indigenous Health

Poche Centres for Indigenous Health are an example of the power of partnership in achieving real change to contribute to closing the gap in life expectancy.

Established and funded by philanthropists Greg Poche AO and Kay Van Norton Poche, Poche Centres seek to leverage the expertise within Universities to seek solutions that address complex health issues faced by Aboriginal people. Since establishing the first Poche Centre in 2008, the Poches have gifted more than \$50million dollars to Aboriginal health.

The Poche Indigenous Health Network

The Poche Indigenous Health Network has been created to enhance the collaborative efforts, expertise and resources of each of the individual Poche Centres. The bi-annual Key Thinkers Forum represents a powerful example of this, providing an opportunity for all sectors of community, Government, non- government and academia to come together in critical discussion of significant issues within Aboriginal public health at a national level.

The 1967 Referendum – Background

On the 27th of May 1967, the Australian Government held a referendum, which altered the Australian Constitution and opened the door for ending inequalities experienced by the first Australians.

The 'Yes' vote, given by over 90 per cent of Australian voters, enabled the Commonwealth to enact laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and removed the prohibition against counting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the census.

Prior to the referendum, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were treated as foreigners in their own home and on their own land. They were not included as Australian citizens; they were regarded as British subjects.

The 1967 referendum paved the way for several significant legislative developments, and for many people it represented a turning point from official discrimination to the promise of full and equal citizenship.

With the introduction of 'positive discrimination' (otherwise known as affirmative action) as a means of addressing disadvantage, WC Wentworth, the first Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, began programs designed to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, such as improvements in healthcare.

50 Years On – The Current Landscape

Despite receiving support from both sides of politics and the vast majority of Australians, fifty years on it is clear that the 1967 referendum did not result in the ending of discrimination or racism. Systemic racism persists in myriad government institutions, including our health systems.

Moreover, our 'nation's rulebook' does not recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as our first people. Moves are currently underway to change this situation. As we prepare this briefing note, the Referendum Council is finalising its consultation on what form any constitutional recognition should take.

It has been reported that Indigenous Australians are overwhelmingly rejecting symbolic gestures and voicing a desire for changes that give them "direct" power over their futures.

Key Thinkers Forum

In our upcoming Key Thinkers Forum, we will be interrogating the past and the present. We will also be focusing towards the future – discussing as a group what could happen at a constitutional level to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We hope we will also be able to discuss what the immediate future might hold for constitutional reform.

We will be joined on the panel by health practitioners and policy makers to help us tackle these questions and form a Poche Opinion.

Discussion Questions

PAST

What did the 1967 Referendum do for the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

PRESENT

What systemic racism still remains in the Australian healthcare system?

What are the implications of this?

FUTURE

National constitution convention recap: what has come of the 12 regional dialogues?

What would real constitutional reform look like in the health sector?

What are the implications?

What's happening overseas? Which indigenous groups are actively participating in their democracies?

How can Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be the drivers of their healthier future?

Where to from here on the health front?

Details of the Key Thinkers' Forum

Date/ Tuesday, 30 May 2017

Time/ 09:00am – 1:00pm

Venue/ ABS Case Study Lecture Theatre 1050, Abercrombie Business School, Corner Abercrombie and Codrington Streets, Darlington

Chair/ Professor Tom Calma AO

Further Information

At the conclusion of each forum a paper is produced, which summarises the issues raised and makes comment or presents an opinion about the topic discussed. This is published as a 'Poche Opinion paper'. Poche Opinions are a tool to contribute to knowledge and to draw the wider community into the key debates and issues in Aboriginal health.

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