

Addressing Critical Issues in Healthcare Access and Delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities.

Deafness Forum Australia Roundtable meeting

Facilitated by Professor Kelvin Kong AM

Canberra, 25 March 2024

During our Roundtable, we discussed pivotal aspects of healthcare access and delivery, focusing on the challenges and innovative solutions in the Ear, Nose, and Throat (ENT) services. 14 key actions and ideas emerged.

In this report, which is not the official meeting communique, we linked the 14 actions and ideas with the Closing The Gap Agreement Agreement 2022 and the Roadmap for Hearing Health 2019.

1. Expansion of Audiologist-led Ear Nose and Throat Models:

Prof Kelvin Kong's successful implementation of an audiologist-led ENT model in Newcastle, NSW, has dramatically reduced waiting times, suggesting a viable blueprint for national adoption. A 'demand map' for service provision should be developed to allocate services better.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform Three – Transforming Government Organisations

- A commitment to transforming mainstream government organisations could support the national adoption of successful models like Prof. Kong's audiologist-led ENT model, enhancing service efficiency and reducing waiting times for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- **Long-term (five to seven years) 4.** State-funded diagnostic audiology services, including the capacity to diagnose hearing loss in children aged under 4, are providing appropriate services in agreed-upon locations. This suggests an expansion and national adoption of audiologist-led models that could help reduce waiting times for ENT services, similar to Prof. Kelvin Kong's model.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- Speech pathology, audiology, and ENT services are accessible within appropriate wait times, particularly for people living in regional and remote locations and in low-socioeconomic urban areas.

- The hearing health workforce delivers patient-centred care that responds to the social and cultural needs of those receiving care.

2. Broadening Audiologist Deployment:

Innovations include deploying audiologists to prisons and juvenile detention centres and integrating them within Aboriginal Community Controlled primary health care services. This approach aims to view patients holistically and recognises the importance of comprehensive care.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform Two – Building the Community-controlled Sector

- Strengthening and committing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health sectors could facilitate the innovative deployment of audiologists in settings like prisons, juvenile detention centres, and community-controlled primary health care services.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- **Medium Term (three to five years) 5.** State and Territory prison health services design and pilot an appropriate approach to identifying people with significant, unremediated hearing loss or ear disease and connecting them with proper hearing and ENT services, including teleservice approaches. This aligns with the innovative deployment of audiologists.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- Primary health care services are well-resourced and can provide regular scheduled and opportunistic ear and hearing health checks and ongoing care to children with ear and hearing conditions in partnership with audiology, speech therapy, and ENT services as needed.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults and children with significant hearing loss have equity of access to and choices regarding the support they need to live well in the community.

3. Revising Referral Pathways:

Traditional referral models are under review to streamline patient care and minimise delays. This involves enabling direct audiologist referrals to ENTs and fostering ongoing audiologist-primary health-ENT relationships.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform Four - Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level

- Shared access to data can support the development of more effective referral pathways by enabling evidence-based decisions on integrating audiologists and ENT services within the health system.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- **Key Actions 9.** Undertake modelling to determine the best way to ensure hearing testing is affordable and accessible for all Australians, including considering a Medicare item for a diagnostic test battery administered by an audiologist without needing a GP referral. This supports the revision of traditional referral models to streamline patient care.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- Health services collect and report on agreed data points to enable assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ear and hearing health at local, national, and jurisdictional levels, facilitating streamlined referral pathways and better integrated care.

4. Re-evaluating of Healthcare KPIs:

Current Key Performance Indicators may not accurately reflect patient wellbeing, suggesting a need for metrics focused on patient outcomes rather than procedural statistics.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform Three – Transforming Government Organisations

- Government organisations' transformation to better respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's needs could involve re-evaluating healthcare KPIs to ensure they accurately reflect patient outcomes and wellbeing.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- While specific actions directly related to re-evaluating KPIs are not listed, the Roadmap's overarching intent to improve service delivery and patient outcomes suggests an alignment with this goal.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- Health services collect and report on agreed data points to enable assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ear and hearing health at local, national, and jurisdictional levels. This could indirectly support the re-evaluation of KPIs by providing more relevant and outcome-focused data.

5. Enhancing Regional Service Provision:

Mobile services were promoted to deliver surgical services directly to remote communities, addressing travel challenges and disconnect with community.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform One - Formal partnerships and shared decision-making

- Strengthening structures for shared decision-making could facilitate the expansion of mobile services and direct delivery of surgical services to remote communities, addressing the unique challenges these populations face.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- **Medium Term (three to five years) 3.** State and Territory health departments identify locations where state-funded diagnostic Audiology services need to be re-established or strengthened, considering teleaudiology as part of the response. This enhances service provision in regional areas.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- Speech pathology, audiology, and ENT services are accessible within appropriate wait times, particularly for people living in regional and remote locations and low-socioeconomic urban areas, directly addressing regional service provision enhancement.

6. Cultural Safety in Services:

The critical need for culturally safe healthcare services, including responsiveness and inclusivity in healthcare delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, was emphasised.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform Two – Building the Community-controlled Sector

- Building formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sectors is crucial for delivering culturally safe healthcare services that are responsive and inclusive.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- Actions specific to enhancing cultural safety in services are implicitly supported by the overall focus on community-led initiatives and the integration of services within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health sectors.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- The hearing health workforce delivers patient-centred care that responds to the social and cultural needs of those receiving care, highlighting the critical need for culturally safe healthcare services.

7. Addressing Gaps in Hearing Services Program:

Identified gaps for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 26 to 50 in the Hearing Services Program call for broader coverage/eligibility advocacy.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform Four - Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level

- Utilising regional data and information can help identify and address gaps in the Hearing Services Program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- **Key Actions 1.** Determine the responsibility, feasibility, and funding for standardised national reporting of hearing loss and establish a national database. This action supports identifying and addressing service gaps through improved data collection and analysis.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- Health services collect and report on agreed-upon data points to enable assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ear and hearing health at local, national, and jurisdictional levels. This is fundamental for addressing gaps in the Hearing Services Program.

8. Support Throughout the Hearing Care Journey:

There is a need for enhanced support from Aboriginal Medical Services and capacity building among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Hearing Health Workers to provide comprehensive care.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform Two – Building the Community-controlled Sector

- Enhancing the capacity of Aboriginal Medical Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Hearing Health Workers can provide comprehensive care and support throughout the hearing care journey.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- **Medium Term (three to five years) 3.** State and Territory health departments identify locations where state-funded diagnostic Audiology services must be re-established or strengthened. This includes providing regular scheduled and opportunistic ear and hearing health checks, crucial for supporting the hearing care journey.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- Primary health care services are well-resourced and can provide regular scheduled and opportunistic ear and hearing health checks and ongoing care to children with ear and hearing conditions in partnership with audiology, speech therapy, and ENT services as needed.

9. Workforce Cultural Sensitivity Training:

Recognising the importance of engaging effectively with community members, the need for cultural sensitivity training for the healthcare workforce was supported.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform Three – Transforming Government Organisations

- The systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations should include cultural sensitivity training to improve the engagement and effectiveness of the healthcare workforce with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- Actions directly related to workforce cultural sensitivity training are integral to the broader objectives of the Roadmap, aiming to ensure that all health services are delivered in a culturally safe manner.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- The hearing health workforce delivers patient-centred care that responds to the social and cultural needs of those receiving care, underlining the importance of cultural sensitivity training.

10. Funding Models:

Guaranteed, long-term government support is needed for community-endorsed models for programs and tools.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform One - Formal partnerships and shared decision-making

- Formal partnerships could secure long-term government support and funding for community-endorsed models and programs.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- The Roadmap emphasises the need for sustainable funding for hearing health initiatives, aligning with the roundtable's call for guaranteed long-term support.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- Community-led, strategically planned, and coordinated research into practical strategies for promotion, prevention, identification, treatment, remediation, and mitigation of the impacts of early-onset chronic ear disease and associated hearing loss in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is appropriately and consistently funded, managed, and evaluated. This outcome directly relates to the need for solid funding models to support comprehensive hearing health care.

11. Leveraging Newborn Screening Program Success:

The potential to replicate the success of the Newborn Screening Program in Indigenous ear health was recognised, emphasising the need for an integrated care pathway from birth.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform Four - Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level

- The success of the Newborn Screening Program can be replicated in Indigenous ear health by leveraging data for integrated care pathways from birth.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- **Key Actions 4.** Continue auditing current newborn screening services and monitoring and reporting compliance with national standards. This is part of leveraging the existing successful models to broader Indigenous ear health contexts.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- Early childhood centres, schools, health services, and youth detention services understand the impacts of poor hearing health on the children and young people they serve and its relevance to their missions. This includes being proactive in early identification and referral of children with hearing loss.

12. National Database for Health Trajectories:

A national database could track children’s health trajectories and life outcomes, aiming for system-wide changes.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform Four - Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level

- Establishing a national database for tracking children’s health trajectories aligns with the priority reform for shared access to data, aiming for system-wide changes in health outcomes.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- **Key Actions 1.** Determine the responsibility, feasibility, and funding for standardised national reporting of hearing loss and establish a national database. This action is fundamental for tracking health trajectories and outcomes.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- Health services collect and report on agreed-upon data points to assess Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ear and hearing health at local, national, and jurisdictional levels. Schools provide attendance and performance records for data linkage with ear and hearing health, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of health trajectories.

13. Inclusion of ‘Hearing’ as a Closing the Gap Target:

This proposal proposes ‘hearing’ as a new target within the Closing the Gap framework to address its critical role in health and educational outcomes.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform One - Formal partnerships and shared decision-making

- The proposal to include ‘hearing’ as a new target within the Closing the Gap framework underscores the importance of collaborative efforts and shared decision-making in addressing critical health and educational outcomes.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- The Roadmap’s actions collectively support the inclusion of hearing as a target by advocating for comprehensive care, access to services, and community engagement in hearing health strategies.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- At local, jurisdictional, and national levels, services work together within and across sectors (including health, education, housing, and justice) to reduce the prevalence of ear disease and hearing loss, to identify ear disease and hearing loss earlier, to treat and remediate more effectively so that the impacts of ear disease throughout the life course are mitigated or avoided altogether. This outcome supports the inclusion of hearing as a specific target within broader health and educational frameworks.

14. Cross-departmental Collaboration:

The importance of collaboration between health, education, and social services departments was stressed to ensure comprehensive support for children’s education and wellbeing.

Aligning Strategies with National Priorities

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: Priority Reform One - Formal partnerships and shared decision-making

- As highlighted in the priority reforms, collaboration between health, education, and social services departments is essential for comprehensive support for children’s education and wellbeing.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Actions:

- Actions promoting cross-departmental collaboration are intrinsic to the Roadmap’s goals, advocating for a united approach to tackling hearing health challenges across different sectors.

Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019 - Outcomes:

- At local, jurisdictional, and national levels, services work together within and across sectors (including health, education, housing, and justice) to reduce the prevalence of ear disease and hearing loss, to identify ear disease and hearing loss earlier, to treat and remediate more effectively so that the impacts of ear disease throughout the life course are mitigated or avoided altogether. This encapsulates the essence of cross-departmental collaboration for achieving comprehensive and effective hearing health care and support.

This completion of the task ensures that each topic from the Roundtable discussion is thoroughly linked with aligned strategies, actions, and outcomes from both the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020 and the Roadmap for Hearing Health, 2019, illustrating a

cohesive effort towards enhancing healthcare access and outcomes for Indigenous Australians, with a special emphasis on hearing health initiatives.

BACKGROUND

Attendees

<i>In random order</i>
Monica Barolits-McCabe Deputy CEO National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
Paul Higginbotham Executive Director & Co-Founder Earbus Foundation
Trude Hallaraker Senior Audiologist Community Outreach Lead for Ear Health Telethon Speech & Hearing
Amanda Wingett Lecturer, Indigenous Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Team ANU School of Medical and Psychology
Lachlan Madden Head of Member engagement & Our Healthy Kids Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council of NSW
Claudette (Sissy) Tyson Kuku Yalanji Aboriginal Research Officer/ Ear Health Southern Qld Excellence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care Metro South Health QLD
Letitia Campbell PRACTICE MANAGER Wiradjuri Kalwun Development Corporation QLD
Susanne Tegen Chief Executive National Rural Health Alliance
Julie Tongs OAM CEO Winnunga Nimmityjah (Strong Health) Aboriginal Health and Community Services CANBERRA
Jamie Newman CEO and Managing Director Orange Aboriginal Medical Service
Samantha Harkus Research Partnerships, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Hearing Health National Acoustics Laboratories
Prof Catherine McMahon Chief Investigator, Aboriginal Children's Hearing Health Program Macquarie University

Kim Terrell Managing Director Hearing Australia
Dr Lana Leslie Stakeholder Manager First Nations Unit Hearing Australia
Kirralee Cross Cultural Leads First Nations Unit Hearing Australia
Chris Carlile Assistant Secretary Hearing Services and Chronic Conditions Branch Department of Health & Aged Care
David Brady Chair Deafness Forum Australia
OBSERVERS
Deafness Forum Australia staff and directors
Claire Clack Director First Nations Health Division Department of Health & Aged Care
Lauren Weeding Assistant Director Maternal, Child and Youth Section First Nations Health Division Department of Health & Aged Care



Deafness Forum Australia is the national, independent citizen voice for the whole hearing health and deafness sector: the impartial advocate representing all voices that need to be heard.

Our purpose is to support these Australians to live well in the community by making hearing health & wellbeing a national priority.

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