

Racism in the health system plagues efforts to close the gap for Indigenous Australians, report shows

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When Banok Rind was in year 10, her teacher didn't think she'd amount to anything. She would grow up to be an unemployed drunk, she was told. That's what Aboriginal people were.

"That's what she told me ... so I didn't think I'd make it to year 11 or year 12, let alone uni," Ms Rind said.

The hurtful comments and daily acts of racism added up over the years. They weighed on her, compounding the transgenerational discrimination her people endured, Ms Rind said.

But she was determined. She did make it to university, enrolled in nursing and moved east.



Yamatji-Badimia woman and aspiring nurse Banok Rind said racism was an enduring problem among healthcare providers.

The 22-year-old is about to enter a system of ongoing racism that exacerbates the yawning gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health, according to a damning new report.

Indigenous people die on average 10-17 years earlier than non-Indigenous Australians and have significantly higher rates of chronic illness and preventable diseases largely wiped out in other high-income countries, found the Closing the Gap report, released on Thursday.

Governments are failing to meet all but one key measure, despite closing the gap in health equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians being an agreed national priority, the report concluded.

Ms Rind, a Yamatji-Badimia woman, hopes she can help combat the damaging culture of discrimination from the inside.

On placements within the health system Ms Rind saw senior staff overlook the symptoms of easily preventable health conditions among Indigenous patients. One of her own family members died of meningococcal after a doctor treated his conditions as a run-of-the-mill fever.

She attended a ward meeting of doctors, nurses and social workers who were shocked to hear a patient was Aboriginal and talked in disparaging terms about his Aboriginality.

"One person said 'he doesn't look Indigenous, I look more Indigenous than he does'," Ms Rind said.

"Hearing these things in a setting where we are trying to reduce health disparities was horrible. How are we going to move ahead when people make assumptions like that and don't understand why it's inappropriate," she said.

Ms Rind said the system needed more Indigenous health workers keenly aware of their communities' needs.

"A lot of the time our people aren't particularly comfortable going to health services to be treated by non-Indigenous health workers because there's a lack of trust based not just what happened in the past, but what still happens everyday," Ms Rind said.

There was a misconception among healthcare workers that Indigenous people were "just a problem", Ms Rind said.

"But we're not a problem to be fixed. We're people. We're the oldest people," Ms Rind said.

Healthcare workers at every level needed to undergo cultural sensitivity training and work with Indigenous communities.

"It can't just be about sitting through a PowerPoint presentation and ticking boxes," she said.

Released in Sydney on Thursday and funded by Oxfam, the Closing the Gap report made a scathing assessment of widespread discrimination in the health system and called for the federal government to hold a national inquiry into institutional racism in hospitals and other healthcare settings

"Systemic racism ... [is] encoded in the policies and funding regimes, healthcare practices and prejudices that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's access to good care" through limited Indigenous-specific primary health care services, meagre access to government health subsidies, increasing price signals in the public health system, and inadequate funding, according to the report

"A failure to engage effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations allowed such racism to continue," the report read.

"More disturbingly, a widespread ambivalence related to 'social silence, discomfort and denial that characterises mainstream Australian thinking'," the Close The Gap Campaign steering committee said.

Dubbed "racism anxiety", the group called for all levels of the health system to acknowledge the problem, respect cultural identity and remove barriers to access.

Close the Gap co-chairwoman Jackie Huggins said discrimination by health workers meant many Indigenous people avoided health care providers or delayed treatment.

"There needs to be much more awareness among healthcare workers around cultural sensitivity," she said.

The Australian Indigenous Doctors Association recently advocated for a zero-tolerance approach to racism to be adopted by the sector.

"Racism needs to be recognised as a strong barrier to achieving a culturally safe health system," the association said.

The report also recommended state, territory and federal governments implement co-ordinated partnerships and strategies that take into account the social and cultural determinants of health.

The federal government should also initiate a national inquiry into racism in hospitals and throughout the healthcare system to identify and combat racism's impact on the health of Indigenous patients.

"We need urgent action," Dr Huggins said.