

Indigenous elders speak out on tragic self-harm and suicide epidemic

April 22 2014, by David Stacey

Thirty-one Elders and community representatives from 17 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around Australia have contributed to a powerful report into self-harm and suicide in which they offer ways in which to address the tragedy.

Released last week, the report - which took almost two years to complete - is a response to the escalating epidemic in modern Australia in which more and more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians - in particular youth - are taking or attempting to take their own lives.

In her introduction to The Elders' Report into Preventing Indigenous Self-Harm and Youth Suicide Professor Pat Dudgeon from The University of Western Australia's School of Indigenous Studies (SIS) writes: "Almost non-existent before the 1980s, youth [suicide](#) across the entire top end of Australia has reached crisis proportions."

A UWA Research Fellow and Director of the SIS-led National Empowerment Project which is addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide and social and emotional wellbeing, Professor Dudgeon is one of Australia's first Indigenous psychologists. She said several factors were involved in the crisis: the brutal history of colonisation, the Stolen Generations' trauma, ongoing racism, unemployment, poverty, overcrowding, marginalisation and higher access to alcohol and drugs.

"With muted voice, the pain and hurt being experienced by our young is being turned upon themselves," Professor Dudgeon said. "While

successive Governments have made concerted efforts to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, little headway has been made in stemming this dark tide of suicide in our communities."

Professor Dudgeon said mainstream Australia needed to recognise there are distinct cultural differences between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that must be taken into account in the way help is provided.

"And any crisis will not be solved unless partnerships are formed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, both in identifying the problem and delivering the solution. As the vital bridge between the modern world and Aboriginal culture, our Elders are fundamental in this process," she said.

Provided by University of Western Australia

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