

The System and ‘the Other’

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In Australia, Indigenous Australians, particularly those in rural and remote areas, experience disproportionately high levels of illness and hospital admissions. Mainstream hospitals are slowly responding to specific needs of Aboriginal people who are often sicker or clinically more complex and have some different care needs related to their life circumstances and culture. For Aboriginal patients, past and present experiences of misunderstanding, stereotyping and shaming make engagement with the health system less effective than it can and should be.

Stepping Up: Mainstream Care for Aboriginal People is a project designed to strengthen understanding of the barriers and enablers of access to good quality care in the mainstream hospital system and to develop and /or evaluate interventions that support mainstream organisations and staff to provide good care.

Emerging themes include the vital role of Aboriginal Liaison Officers, the differing ability of individual wards and units to respond to Aboriginal needs in the whole patient journey, the importance of systemic racism in the clinical setting, and the need for attention to the specific ‘micro-barriers’ to coordinated care across primary and tertiary, Aboriginal and mainstream health care.

I. THE QUESTION

There are conflicting arguments about how best to tackle issues for marginalised groups within mainstream systems. Some argue for special needs on the basis of disadvantage, others for equivalent needs recognising differences in priorities and worldview. As we prepare for the second phase of this research, focused on developing and or evaluating interventions, we are considering the following questions:

- Will a focus on equity or disadvantage be more useful in this context?
- Do Aboriginal patients from rural and remote areas have the same kind of needs as other patients from rural and remote areas, but in different shapes and flavours?
- What role does culture play— organisational and social culture?
- How best can we encourage the mainstream health system to respond sustainably and reliably?
- What strategies are most effective in tackling covert racism and the effects of colonisation?
- We would like to open these questions to a wider audience and invite dialogue about possible approaches.