Considerations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols when visiting Hospital and Health Services

Introduction

Queensland Health acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands across Queensland. We recognise their on-going custodianship and connection to their lands.

The purpose of this document is to provide Queensland Health Executives and officials with general guidance on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols when visiting Hospital and Health Services. Due to the diversity of peoples and cultural protocols across Queensland, local information is also highly recommended for the locations to be visited.

In every Queensland Health Hospital and Health Service, an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff member will be able to provide local information to ensure that local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols are readily available.

Please contact the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Capability Team for the contact in each Hospital and Health Service.

When meeting an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Elder or staff member it is advisable to ask their relationship to the local community. They may hold a leadership status within the community or surrounding area. Ensure they are treated with high regard and take the time to build rapport.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander construct of health

Please note that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples traditionally view their health in a broad sense, which includes consideration of the physical, cultural and spiritual components of their wellbeing.

For Aboriginal people, culture, land, spirituality and identity are central to perceptions of wellbeing and health. The 1989 National Aboriginal Health Strategy states that:

“Health to Aboriginal peoples is a matter of determining all aspects of their life, including control over their physical environment, of dignity, of community self-esteem, and of justice. It is not merely a matter of the provision of doctors, hospitals, medicines or the absence of disease and incapacity.”

Ceremonies

The ceremonies described are those most likely to be encountered in Queensland. These cultural ceremonies hold deep significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Aboriginal ceremonies been handed down from generation to generation for over 40,000 years.

The ceremonies include:

- Welcome to Country
- Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians/Owners
- Smoking ceremony
- Blessing/prayer (Torres Strait Islander cultural practice).

Observing these cultural practices enables sharing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and enhances relationships with local community members built on respect and recognition.

Welcome to Country

A Welcome to Country is a traditional protocol for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It follows the traditional practice whereby people entering another’s lands (country) would be invited or will have sought permission from the Traditional Custodians of that country.

It can only be conducted by Traditional Custodians/Owners of the land (or sea) on which an event is taking place.

A Welcome to Country should be conducted at major public functions. Appropriate functions include government organised, funded and co-funded events such as significant launches of government policy or programs, openings of festivals, award programs, conferences and significant community engagement forums. This symbolic ceremony allows Traditional Custodians to maintain this practice of welcoming visitors and providing permission to conduct business on their country.

This ceremony can be performed in many ways and will be at the discretion of the Traditional Owner group. For example, it may include a speech, traditional song, dance or musical (e.g. didgeridoo) performance. The Traditional Custodians may also choose to include a smoking ceremony which can be conducted at the start or end of the event. More information about the smoking ceremony follows.

A Welcome to Country is usually presented by an Elder from the Traditional Custodian group; however an Elder may not always be available and may nominate the appropriate person to attend.

Be guided by other participants as to whether or not you should stand during the Welcome to Country.
Response to a Welcome to Country

Immediately following the Welcome to Country it is appropriate that a speaker, which may include a Queensland Government representative, responds with an Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners / Custodians and Elders. This not only provides a means to respectfully acknowledge the person who has provided the welcome, it also acknowledges the Traditional Owners / Custodians and Elders of the land and/or sea on which the event is taking place.

As a minimum, appropriate wording for responding to a Welcome to Country would include:

“I would like to thank <insert name> and respectfully acknowledge the <insert name of Traditional Owners / Custodians> people of the land (and/or sea) on which this event is taking place. I would also like to acknowledge the Elders, both past and present.”

Care should be taken when pronouncing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander titles, such as names and places. Always seek advice from relevant persons to confirm correct pronunciation.

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners / Custodians and Elders

The Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians demonstrates respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and recognises the importance of ongoing connections the land and/or seas.

Like a Welcome to Country, an Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians is to be provided at all Queensland Government events as outlined in the Welcome to Country section, and other events including, but not limited to:

- Inter departmental and / or divisional workshops, meetings and seminars
- Meetings with non-government organisations, businesses, Australian and Local Governments
- Official meetings with groups and / or individuals.

The acknowledgement does not have to be delivered by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, and all Queensland Health staff are encouraged to undertake this practice when appropriate. Usually the main acknowledgement is delivered by the most senior organisational representative at the event. However, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff member or community representative may be asked to do so.

Suggested wording is provided below. It is recommended that the speaker provide the Traditional Custodian group name(s) if known, and if comfortable to do so, personalise their acknowledgement.

“Other key speakers and participants may wish to take the opportunity to also precede their discussions with an Acknowledgement.

A short pause should be taken after the acknowledgement as a sign of respect, before proceedings continue.

Smoking ceremony

The smoking ceremony is an ancient cultural ceremony that involves burning various native plant materials over a small fire to produce smoke. The smoke contains cleansing properties and the ability to ward off negative spirits. This significant symbolic practice reflects Aboriginal people’s spiritual connection to the land, and is generally associated with births, deaths, marriages, men’s and women’s business.

Elders hold the cultural authority, responsibilities and knowledge of lore and customs related to conducting a smoking ceremony, as well as the provisions for other people to undertake these responsibilities. Depending on the size of the event, a smoking ceremony can take between 10 and 20 minutes to perform.

Torres Strait Islander blessing/prayer

In the Torres Strait region it is respectful to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the surrounding land and seas and thank the community for taking the time to meet with you.

Due to the strong Christian beliefs that have been interwoven into contemporary Torres Strait lifestyle and culture, some high level meetings and events will also begin with a prayer or blessing.

The prayer or blessing may be followed by an Island hymn. Prayers and hymns will also precede meals, celebration events and feastings. In most cases, an ordained Minister will perform the prayer and an Elder will perform a blessing.

Torres Strait Islander cultural events include the Coming of the Light and Mabo Day. Due to the historical relationship and shared cultural respect, Torres Strait Islander cultural practices are often also incorporated into Aboriginal events.